Shadow Over Eldirin

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Eldirin and Goldan

Nestled deep within the heart of the Ancient Oak Woods, where the trees rise like emerald pillars to brush the skies and the canopy glows with a silver-green hue in the light of the twin moons, lies the elven city of Eldirin. Known in the songs of sylvan bards as the Crown of the Forest, Eldirin is a marvel of natural harmony and arcane craftsmanship, where the beauty of the living world is blended with the grace of elven ingenuity. The city is not built in defiance of nature, but rather as a part of it, its structures rising from the roots and branches of ancient oaks, seamlessly woven with the land through magic and reverence.

Eldirin is encircled by a living wall of colossal trees—specially shaped and nurtured over centuries through druidic arts to form a seamless barrier of bark and leaf. These sentinel trees, known as the Wardens, are bound by enchantment to remain vigilant, their hollowed interiors patrolled by silent elven sentinels who move with the wind. Ornate gatehouses of silvery wood and etched crystal allow entry through the natural wall, and each bears the sigil of House Elenath, the ruling family whose bloodline traces back to the Age of Dawning.

The city is bisected by the River Lyavarel, a wide and sparkling waterway fed by subterranean springs and glacial runoff from the Mistshroud Peaks to the north. The river glows faintly with a phosphorescent shimmer after dusk, a phenomenon attributed to the presence of moonblessed reeds and enchanted trout that dwell beneath its surface. Elegant bridges of woven mithril and living wood span the Lyavarel at strategic intervals, each one distinct in design and telling the story of a past monarch or battle through subtle carvings and runes.

Eldirin is arranged in flowing, concentric rings, each serving a distinct purpose. At the heart lies the Althalaen, the Noble Quarter, where high towers rise like woven spires from the trees themselves. These dwellings are works of living sculpture, shaped by magic and patience to resemble curling leaves, cascading vines, and blooming flowers. At the highest point of the city stands the Palace of Silver Winds, the residence of King Morlen and Queen Isandra. The palace is a vision of translucent crystal and moonwood, its towers crowned with star-shaped domes and balconies that float suspended in the air through ancient levitation enchantments. The royal gardens drift upon platforms of light, and songbirds of impossible hues flit among rare blossoms.

To the east of the river lies the Guilds' Quarter, known as Elenboril. This district hums with the soft sounds of arcane forges, weaver's looms, and the rhythmic chimes of the Enchanters' Hall. Here, artisans and scholars ply their trades in tree-homes modified to serve as workshops and libraries, their interiors aglow with the soft pulse of stored magic. The scent of herbs, smoke, and ink mingles in the air, and apprentices hurry through the spiraling paths that wind among the branches.

Westward of Lyavarel lies the Sylfaen, or Common Quarter, home to hunters, scouts, farmers, and those not of noble or scholarly blood. The dwellings here are simpler but no less

beautiful, carved into the roots and hollows of ancient trees, connected by rope bridges and moss-lined paths. Communal gardens flourish under the open sky, and the laughter of children can often be heard beneath the music of wind chimes and harp strings.

Along the southern edge of the city, near the outer trees of the Warden Wall, are the Shadow Rows, a district known to harbor the disenfranchised, exiles, and merchants of dubious repute. Though not truly a slum by the standards of other realms, it is a place of secrets and shadows, where the scent of spiced wine and the clink of illegal alchemy compete with the low murmurs of clandestine meetings. The Shadow Rows are tolerated by the crown, for even in the most luminous forest, the shadows have their place.

Eldirin is a city of contrasts—of grandeur and humility, light and shade, tradition and quiet rebellion. Ruled wisely and with grace by King Morlen, a warrior-scholar with eyes like twilight, and Queen Isandra, a powerful seer whose voice can calm storms, the city thrives as a sanctuary of ancient wisdom and timeless beauty. Visitors from afar speak of Eldirin in hushed awe, for once one beholds the City of Leaves and Light, its image lingers in dreams ever after.

High in the rugged reaches of the Mistshroud Peaks, where the air thins and the clouds cling to the mountains like drifting ghosts, the clang of steel and the rumble of stone echo across the crags. It is here that the dwarves of the Ironbone Clans have come in great number, a host of two hundred thousand strong, to claim their place beneath the stone. With banners of black and copper flying against the wind and the steady discipline of ancient tradition guiding their labor, they have set their minds and hammers to building a new mountainhold—the city of Goldan.

Goldan is not yet finished, but already the mark of dwarven craft is etched deep into the bones of the mountain. The great gate—called the Maw of Goldan—yawns open in a crescent of jagged stone, flanked by massive statues of ancestral warriors in half-completed form. Inside, the dwarves have begun the labor of turning natural caverns into the foundations of their home. Vast chambers that once lay hidden beneath the mountain's skin now blaze with torchlight and ring with the sound of iron on rock. Stonecutters and masons climb scaffolds hewn from felled pine and ash, chiseling runes and supports into walls as thick as a fortress. The air within smells of sweat, smoke, and crushed granite.

The central cavity of the mountain, a colossal dome formed by nature and time, has been chosen as the heart of Goldan. There, platforms are being carved layer by layer around the interior wall like giant, spiraling shelves. Massive stairways are being etched into the stone, and rope pulleys haul crates and ore to and from levels yet unnamed. From these central heights, engineers oversee the slow crawl of bridges taking shape across wide chasms, with keystones being laid and measured by the most precise among them. The walkways and columns are solid, wide enough for marching regiments or hauling trains of ore-laden carts. Though unfinished, these halls already bear the straight, angular character of dwarven architecture: sturdy, geometric, and unyielding.

Beyond the central hub, side tunnels stretch like veins, burrowed by teams of miners whose beards are thick with dust. The ring of pickaxes is constant as they pursue deeper passageways and veins of metal. Though the dwarves have yet to strike gold, they have found an abundance of iron, which is already being put to use. Forges glow red in temporary smithy halls, and blacksmiths hammer iron into nails, braces, hinges, and braces that will be the skeleton of the deeper city. Sparks fly from anvils as blades are quenched, beams are reinforced, and tools are tempered. The nights and days blend in the orange light of the furnaces, where the song of the smith is a roar of flame and the rhythm of hammers.

Outside the city, at the tree line where the mountains descend into forest, dwarven lumber crews fell timber and shape it into beams, scaffoldings, and bracing supports. Great chains of mules and dwarves drag logs upward along winding roads carved into the rock, where stonecutters wait to shape and fit them into the developing structures. Tents and supply camps dot the slopes like moss on stone, guarded by bearded sentries with axe and crossbow in hand.

King Mugumar IV the Blackbeard rules this monumental endeavor from a half-carved throne chamber still open to the cavern wind. Broad-shouldered and hard-eyed, he wears a mantle of black iron and wolf fur, his beard streaked with soot and silver. Beside him stands Queen Dara, a tactician and builder in her own right, whose designs guide the layout of terraces for subterranean farming, fed by redirected water channels and deep fungi gardens that thrive in the mineral-rich dark. Together, they govern not with comfort, but with vision and the grim pride of a people shaping their destiny from stone.

Goldan is a city of potential, its halls still echoing with the rawness of creation. It is not yet a home, but a dream being forged by grit and blood. Every brick laid, every tunnel dug, every plank set into place brings it closer to life. And in the hearts of those laboring tirelessly within the mountain's chest, there burns the certainty that one day, Goldan will shine brighter than the gold it has yet to find.

The early morning mist still clung to the forest floor like a veil when the elven hunting party moved silently through the underbrush, bows slung over their backs, and lightfooted hounds trailing behind them. They were six in number—scouts and rangers from the House of Windleaf—tasked with tracking a herd of silver-antlered deer that had passed through the northern groves the night before. Their garb was a blend of bark, moss, and shadow, and their movements were so quiet even the birds did not stir at their passing.

By midday, the hunt had ended successfully. The deer had been downed with clean shots, and the elves had offered silent thanks to the forest before turning their attention eastward, where whispers had spoken of disturbances at the edge of the Mistshroud Peaks. Curious and cautious, they moved through the denser thickets and shadowed boughs, climbing the ridges and sliding through briar and fern until the treeline thinned and the peaks of the mountains loomed like grey teeth against the sky.

They came to rest behind a ridge of lichen-covered boulders and crouched in the tall ferns, their eyes narrowed. Across a cleared glade, dwarves were at work—dozens of them, bearded and grim, chopping down old trees that had stood for centuries. The thunder of axes biting wood echoed against the slopes, and already heaps of logs were piled on sledges. Massive

ropes and iron hooks were fastened to trunks like beasts of burden. The elves watched, their expressions darkening.

“They cut without asking,” murmured Faelar, the eldest among them, his voice low and taut. “These trees bore witness to the birth of our city. They are not merely wood.”

Thalanil, younger and less patient, scowled. “Dwarves never ask. They see the mountain and think it is theirs to claim. But the forest… it is not stone. It breathes.”

“We must not act in anger,” said Arannis, steady and composed. “Not yet. We are scouts, not sword-bearers. Let us see more before word is sent.”

They moved deeper along the ridge, staying hidden. Near the stone-ringed outcrop known as Millow Point, they spotted another group—dwarven hunters moving among the rocks, tracking game. The elves did not reveal themselves, melting into the shadows like mist fleeing the sun. The dwarves, oblivious to the elven presence, passed within bowshot and never knew they had been watched.

By dusk, the elves had returned to Eldirin. The twilight filtered through the silverleaves as they passed beneath the city’s living gates. They made their way swiftly through the winding treewalks and halls until they reached the Office of the Landwardens, where Captain Elyndor, steward of the king’s borders, received them.

Elyndor, a tall elf with streaks of white in his golden hair, listened intently as Faelar relayed the tale.

“So,” Elyndor said, clasping his hands behind his back, “the mountain stirs with iron and axe, and the lowlanders have come to claim it.”

“They make no secret of their purpose,” said Faelar. “They fell the forest openly. We saw no emblems of alliance, no herald, no envoy sent to parley.”

Elyndor’s face grew grave. Without another word, he turned and ascended the inner paths toward the Palace of Silver Winds.

King Morlen sat beneath the high dome of the council chamber, reading over old documents in the waning light. Queen Isandra stood nearby, feeding silver koi in a floating pond. Elyndor entered with a short bow and relayed the news.

Morlen’s expression grew cold.

“They make bold claim to land not theirs,” he said. “The slopes below Millow Point have ever been watched by our wardens. The mountain’s roots feed our rivers, and its winds stir our groves. They knew this land was watched and came nonetheless.”

Queen Isandra moved to his side and said, “Let blood not be the first language spoken. Send a message. A firm, clear one.”

Morlen nodded and sat at his writing table. He took up a silver quill, dipped it in green ink, and began to write on vellum of woven bark. His script was flowing and elegant, but the words were firm and filled with the weight of history.

“To King of the dwarven folks, from Morlen, King of Eldirin under the Leaves of the Ancient Oak Woods. Know this land you now work is not forgotten ground, nor nameless. From the Days of Twilight, these woods and slopes have been held sacred and watched by our kind. Millow Point marks the boundary of our stewardship. No axe should bite, no fire should burn, without word or accord. We call not for war, but for parley. Let the old ways speak before the new paths are carved.”

He rolled the letter, sealed it with a clasp of greenstone bearing the sigil of Eldirin, and slid it into a golden scroll-tube engraved with ivy.

“Summon Envoy Maelion,” he said. “Let him bear this to the mountain. And tell him—if their axes fall upon our groves again without word, we shall answer with more than parchment.”

And so the letter passed from leaf to stone, a quiet warning carried on velvet footsteps toward the thundering forge of Goldan.

The journey to the Mistshroud Peaks was long and silent. Envoy Maelion, cloaked in pale green and bearing the golden tube cradled within a pouch of soft barkcloth, crossed forests, streams, and narrow ridges where the trees grew thin and the wind carried the smell of cold stone. When he arrived at the outer edge of Goldan, still a city of scaffolds and echoing forges, the contrast with Eldirin was stark—here, nothing lived that wasn’t hammered, mined, or carved.

At the gate, two dwarven guards regarded him with suspicion. He bowed with the calm dignity of an elf unshaken by noise or stone.

“I bear words from King Morlen of Eldirin for your king. I come with no quarrel.”

The dwarves exchanged a glance. One, a grizzled warrior with soot in his beard, grunted, “Wait here.”

He returned with a third guard clad in scaled iron and a deep blue surcoat. This dwarf took the scroll without a word and gestured for Maelion to follow. He was led to a chamber with high, rough-hewn walls lit by red lanterns. The chamber was still being furnished—stone benches being chiseled, tapestries not yet hung. After a curt nod, two other guards approached and escorted Maelion back out of the mountain, down the stony slope without so much as a farewell. The gate closed behind him with a final thud.

Within the growing halls of Goldan, the message was delivered to King Mugumar IV, seated on a massive slab of granite that would soon be shaped into a true throne. His black beard was bound in four braids, and his eyes gleamed with amusement even before the scroll was unsealed.

He read the letter aloud to his advisors and commanders. When he finished, he burst into a deep, booming laugh.

“Can you believe these elves?” he roared. “We’ve barely pitched our tents, and already they whimper over a few trees. What did they expect—that we’d build a mountain city out of flower petals and dew?”

Laughter rumbled through the chamber like rolling stones. One of the engineers snorted, “Do they think we’re carving the forest down to the roots? We’ve taken less than what a winter storm would fell.”

Another dwarf muttered, “They’re always thinking the trees belong only to them. As if the mountains didn’t grow here long before they started singing to squirrels.”

King Mugumar grinned, then waved the chuckles away and called for ink and parchment. He set his heavy hand to the paper, his script broad and straightforward, stained with spots of iron dust.

“To Morlen, King under Leaf and Wind, from Mugumar IV the Blackbeard, Lord of Goldan and Voice of the Stone. Your message reached us. You speak of sacred trees; we speak of shelter and labor. The trees we fell are used as needed—for halls, for homes, for the shaping of a new city born in the stone. These trees were not born with elven names carved into their bark. Still, we do not seek quarrel with your folk. Let the mountains remain free, and the forest yours—so long as your domain does not stretch root into the heart of our stone. We build, not burn. Let us not turn stone and leaf against each other for so small a matter.”

He sealed the letter with black wax and took a shard of recently mined stone—a rare piece of deep-blue marblestone with flecks of silver—and handed both to a trusted courier. The dwarven envoy, a sturdy figure named Bramli Steelhand, set off toward Eldirin the next morning.

At the Palace of Silver Winds, Bramli was received with formality but not warmth. The guards escorted him through the quiet city of woven leaves and singing water to the king’s chamber, where Morlen awaited.

The letter was read in silence.

When it was finished, King Morlen handed it to Elyndor and turned to stare out the window, watching the leaves sway in the high boughs.

“So,” he said at length, “they call it small. They say the trees hold no names. But we have walked beside these groves for a thousand years. We have named them in song, in silence, in sorrow. These trees do not cry out, but we hear them all the same.”

Queen Isandra stepped forward. “Will we answer? With soldiers?”

“No,” Morlen replied. “Not yet. I will not cast steel into the forest over pride. Let them build. But they will not touch what grows within our borders.”

The wind was low and damp as a hunting party of eight dwarves from Goldan marched down from the slopes of the Mistshroud Peaks, their boots crushing pine needles and dry twigs with every deliberate step. The lead hunter, Grumri Rockjaw, carried a heavy crossbow on his back and a skinning knife at his belt. His companions were seasoned—some miners-turned-hunters, others former scouts from mountain skirmishes of old. They moved into the thinning trees near Millow Point, following tracks of a large stag said to roam the borderland groves.

They spoke in low voices, joking about the hunt and the complaints of the elves.

“Think we’ll see one of ‘em?” muttered Brokli, the youngest among them. “They say they float through the trees and vanish when you blink.”

“If they float, I’ve got a stone in my beard that sings,” Grumri grunted. “Let ‘em watch. They don’t own the air.”

But as they rounded a mossy slope, they came face to face with another group—ten elves, lean and silent, bows at the ready. Their leader, Thalanil, stepped forward with narrowed eyes and his hand resting on the hilt of a curved knife.

“You’ve crossed into the woods of Eldirin,” Thalanil said, his voice sharp as frost. “Turn back. These lands are watched.”

Grumri stepped forward, raising his chin. “We crossed into a forest. One we saw no walls around. We track a stag, not your shadows. We owe no turn back.”

Another elf, Serelis, scoffed. “You trample saplings and leave meatless traps. Already the beasts flee. You poison the hunt.”

“Poison the—?” Grumri spat. “You speak of poison, knife-ear? Your people prance in trees and call it wisdom while the world moves on without you.”

“And you think carving stone makes you wise?” Thalanil’s voice rose. “This is where our land begins. You have no right here.”

“No right?” Brokli stepped forward, fist clenched. “Nature belongs to none. We walk where we will!”

The tension snapped like dry bark. Without command, fists were thrown. Elven speed met dwarven strength—grapples, punches, and shouts filled the grove. Grumri and Thalanil collided, rolling into brambles. Brokli took a branch to the ribs before swinging a boot at Serelis. Blood was drawn—not with blade, but with bare hand and stone. After several bruising minutes, the elves disengaged, breathing hard, blood on tunics and scratches across faces.

Thalanil, wiping blood from his lip, growled, “Next time, we bring blades. Stay out of our lands.”

Grumri, bruised but unbent, spat onto the leaves. “We don’t take orders from leaf-whispers. You want to claim the wild, try fencing it.”

Both groups turned back to their homes with wounded pride and battered bodies, the grove now a marker of the first true clash.

But it was not the last.

Just three days later, further downriver from the Lyavarel’s northern fork, another encounter flared. A dwarven fishing party of six, nets cast wide and lines dropped into the clear waters, laughed over a bucket of wriggling trout. Their voices echoed across the trees, loud and unconcerned.

Soon, an elven patrol arrived from the east bank—archers and river-guardians who had fished this stretch of river for generations. Their leader, Ellenwe, called out across the current.

“You fish in sacred waters. Cease your nets and return to stone.”

The dwarves looked up from their catch, annoyed.

“Sacred?” said Durlin Forgegut, leaning on a spear. “Looks like water to me. And fish don’t sing your songs when we pull ‘em up.”

“The river is watched,” Ellenwe replied firmly. “It feeds our groves and our rites. You have no leave here.”

“Then give us your map of what’s forbidden,” grunted another dwarf, “and we’ll see if your gods drew any lines we care about.”

Tension rose, hands went to blades, but no fight broke that day. The elves left, their warning delivered cold and sharp. The dwarves remained, their pride unwilling to retreat.

Whispers traveled fast—of fists thrown and river rights challenged. In both cities, murmurs stirred louder in the council halls, and the lines between stone and leaf began to tremble.

Beneath the ever-thickening shadow of the Mistshroud Peaks, the city of Goldan rang with the ceaseless din of progress. Tunnels echoed with the clang of pick against stone, and the deep chants of laboring dwarves rolled like thunder through the growing halls. With the first vein of silver struck deep below the main caverns, a wave of new energy surged through the workforce. Silver, pure and gleaming, was quickly mined, smelted, and poured into fresh molds that bore the stern profile of King Mugumar IV the Blackbeard. The new coins were thick and heavy, stamped with the mountain's crest on one side and the King's braided visage on the other, his eyes set with resolve.

“Hold one of these in your hand,” said Bramli Steelhand, holding up a coin to a group of miners during their break, “and you hold the future of Goldan itself.”

Meanwhile, above ground, the forest groaned beneath the axes of the dwarven loggers. Every day before the sun crested the eastern ridges, teams descended into the woods with saws and

blades, felling trees and stripping them clean of branches. The logs were not wasted; bark was removed, lengths measured, and mules laden with ropes and packs began the hard trek uphill. Tracks were carved into the mountain slopes, wide enough for cart-wheels and hoofed beasts, turning the ancient trails into lumber roads.

Within the mountain, vast stone halls continued to take form. Massive statues of ancestors and warrior-kings now flanked the central passages—stone forms with helms resting on great-bearded heads, hammers resting on laps, and eyes forever cast toward the city's heart. The walls were no longer bare; masons etched endless geometric patterns, spirals, clan sigils, and tales of the exodus from the lowlands. Each chisel stroke was deliberate, the handiwork of artists who knew the patience of stone.

"Tighten the braces here," called Urgil Bronzehand, foreman of the third tunnel. "We dig deep, but we stand tall. No one's tomb is gonna be their own roof."

Timber was hurried into the depths where new tunnels opened like veins beneath the mountain's chest. Beams were hoisted and wedged between walls, each one checked for soundness. Fires from forges and torches alike made the rock glisten with sweat and soot.

As day turned to night, the city's quarters began to take shape. Near the upper ledges, the noble halls were cut wide and tall, with balcony-like arches that overlooked the city's core. Below, the guilds carved their niches—smiths, stonewrights, engineers, brewers, and coin-makers. Market halls were shaped with tiered shelves and stalls, where barter and trade already hummed beneath half-finished columns.

On the lower levels, the slums began to form: tight corridors where the poor and the lowborn carved space with their own hands, shaping hearths and alcoves where they could. In the eastern caverns, traders from outside began carving their own quarters—half-finished now, but rich with foreign accents and smells of strange spices.

Taverns began to rise first among the trader lanes. One such place, the Ember Beard, was already famous for its strong ales and carved stone hearth. Each evening, after the day's last hammer fell, dwarves gathered there, nursing clay mugs and wiping ash from their beards.

"Another day, another tunnel," grunted Dolrin Axebrow, raising his cup. "By my beard, if this keeps up, we'll hit the earth's heart before winter."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," laughed his companion. "More warmth down there, less damn wind."

Ale flowed and fires crackled, and laughter echoed with the depth of dwarven mirth.

Above it all, the air shafts were slowly rising—spiraling channels that not only breathed fresh wind into the bowels of the mountain but were angled just so to catch the sun. Light filtered down at midday, refracted by polished crystal slabs, casting golden bars onto bridges and passageways, marking time in stone.

“Even the sun bends to our will,” said one engineer proudly, watching the first successful light shaft illuminate a carved pathway.

Goldan was no longer just an idea or an encampment—it was becoming a living mountain, shaped by sweat, silver, and song. And as the dwarves worked, they sang—low, deep songs that began in the chest and echoed through the halls, binding them to stone and history alike. The mountain answered in silence, but its shape shifted with every verse.

The fire crackled low in the Ember Beard tavern, its amber light dancing across soot-darkened stone walls and casting long shadows from the thick-beamed ceiling. Pipesmoke curled in slow ribbons through the air, mingling with the rich scent of roasted meat, ale, and charred oak. Three dwarves sat at a thick table near the hearth, their boots planted firmly on the flagstone floor, their armor marked by the wear of daily patrols.

Fimly Stoneknuckle sat hunched over his fourth mug of dark ale, his beard so massive it fell like a cascade over his chest, merging with an equally wild moustache and a pair of bushy eyebrows that obscured everything but a large nose. The links of his chain mail rattled when he moved, and his axe leaned against his stool. Next to him sat Mordil Hewer, wrapped in sturdy leather with a round shield at his back and a warhammer leaning against the table. He puffed on a crooked pipe, blowing smoke rings into the fire. Across from them, Gurin Ironside, clad in chain mail and carrying a spiked mace, sipped slowly at his ale, his eyes watchful beneath a low brow.

“Lumber guild’s looking to go past Millow Point,” Mordil said, tapping the bowl of his pipe on the table. “They want to set up a second camp, deeper in the wood. Some even talk about cutting near the elven hunting trails.”

“Aye,” Gurin muttered. “It’s asking for trouble. We ain’t loggers, but we’re the ones stuck patrolling when things go sour.”

Fimly downed his mug in one long pull and set it down with a mighty thud. He let out a croaking belch that echoed through the tavern like a distant drumroll, froth clinging to his beard like morning snow on a thicket.

“Mrhmph grumble mmff,” Fimly said, his voice muffled through the tangle of hair. Mordil leaned in.

“What?”

Fimly leaned forward, brow twitching beneath his brow. “I said—blasted elves think trees are their cousins. You cut a log, they act like you’ve killed a brother.”

“Aye,” Gurin grunted. “But they don’t mind walking where they please, do they? We’re the ones always in the wrong, never them.”

The three sat in silence for a time, the fire snapping gently. Then they rose, strapped on weapons, and set out, their boots crunching gravel as they left Goldan’s halls for another patrol through the outer woodlands.

By mid-morning, the mist clung to the forest paths, and the dwarves moved cautiously, keeping to worn trails carved by wagons and mules. The logging camp lay ahead—an open glade now stripped bare, dotted with sawn stumps and log piles. Axes rang in the distance.

It was near this clearing that they saw movement. Two elves stood just within the treeline, watching the camp. Clad in forest greens and light cloaks, they bore no weapons in hand, but their posture was wary, alert.

Fimly raised a hand. “Oi! What’re you doin’ this close to the camp, eh? Thought your lot said Millow Point was the border.”

One of the elves, tall and sharp-eyed, replied coolly, “We walk the forest as our kind has for ages beyond your memory. These woods are older than your city, your king, or your stone-cut names.”

Gurin stepped forward, mace hanging from his belt. “That’s the talk that always comes, isn’t it? You tell us not to come past a stump, but you go where you want and call it your birthright. Can’t have it both ways.”

“You defile sacred earth,” the second elf said, his voice rising. “The trees speak of your axes. We are here to witness.”

“Witness, is it?” Mordil said, hand tightening on his warhammer. “You spy, and then accuse. You judge us for taking what we need, while you wander our roads like ghosts in your cloaks.”

The tension was a coiled spring. Then a movement—nobody would later say who made the first swing. Steel flashed, shouts echoed through the trees, and in the clearing’s edge, blood was spilled. The elves moved fast, blades drawn in a breath—but dwarven armor held, and dwarven strikes landed true. The fight was swift, brutal. One elf fell to Fimly’s axe, buried deep in his side. The other stumbled back with a blade in his gut, struck down by Gurin’s mace.

Silence followed, heavy as stone. The dwarves stood, breathing hard.

Fimly rubbed his beard, smeared with blood. “Mmff... shouldna... mmhff come so close…”

Mordil knelt beside the bodies. “They’re dead. We can’t leave ‘em here. If their kin find ‘em, they’ll say we ambushed ‘em.”

Gurin looked to the woods, then back at the corpses. “We bury them. Quiet. Deep. No markers. No words.”

They dug with their hands and small blades, working beneath a cluster of trees where roots ran thick. The bodies were laid gently, without joy, but without ceremony. The earth was packed again, and leaves scattered over the disturbed soil.

“We tell no one,” Mordil said quietly.

Fimly nodded, his face grave beneath his beard. “This... didn’t happen. Just a quiet patrol. Nothin’ more.”

As they walked back toward the mountain, the forest behind them seemed to watch, and the wind whispered through the trees with a tone just sharper than before.

The morning mist was thin and silver when Fimly, Mordil, and Gurin set out once more on patrol, their boots crunching the damp gravel of the dwarven logging trail that curved between the mountain’s edge and the deep green of the forest. The air was fresh, birdsong flitting through the trees, and for once, there was no tension in the wind—no unease clinging to the branches.

It was not long before they spotted movement ahead. Four figures approached on the trail, cloaked in leaf-toned garb, but their hands bore no weapons, and their posture was relaxed. As they neared, Fimly recognized the pointed ears and silent step of elves, but this time, there was no anger in the eyes, no challenge in the gait.

“Hail,” called the lead elf, raising an open hand. “We come not to quarrel.”

Mordil tightened his grip on his warhammer for a moment, then relaxed. “That’s a welcome change.”

The elf stepped closer, his features open and warm. “I am Linthal of the Birchbound Glade. These are my kin. We heard of disputes, of blood and borders. We came to see who walks the trail today—not to draw lines, but perhaps... to erase one.”

Gurin gave a grunt of approval. “That’s a better notion than most’ve had lately.”

Linthal nodded. “We think perhaps these woods have space enough for all who walk them. Trees fall, yes, but others grow. Waters run, but they return. The land provides, if we respect it.”

Fimly made a noise like a gravel-slide and pulled his thick pipe from his beard. He packed it with his usual mix of darkroot and mossleaf, lit it with a flint spark, and puffed a few clouds into the air. Then, in a gesture rare among dwarves, he extended it to Linthal.

“Mmrph... share a puff, elf.”

Linthal’s brow lifted in amusement. He took the pipe, added a pinch of golden Migli weed—sweet and fragrant—and drew a long, slow breath.

“Pfff. Yours is heavy and deep. Ours is light and warm. Together, they make a fine smoke.”

They passed the pipe in a circle, smoke drifting through the forest as laughter began to soften the silence between them. After some time, Linthal reached into a leather satchel and pulled forth a small statue, no longer than a dwarf’s fist. It was carved from oak, polished smooth, the figure a lithe, curling form with a crown of leaves and arms outstretched like branches in the wind.

“This,” Linthal said, placing it on a flat rock between them, “is an image of Liraelis, the spirit of the woods. We say she was once a tree that sang so sweetly the wind refused to pass her by. She grew where no roots should take, upon stone, among flame. When fire came, she did not burn. When axes came, they turned to sap. The forest remembers her, and she walks where peace is made.”

He looked at the dwarves and smiled.

“May the wood spirits guard over you, friends.”

Fimly, touched in his own gruff way, nodded and covered the statue gently with his hand before handing it to Gurin, who tucked it into his pouch.

“Well then,” Mordil said, slapping his shield down like a seat, “seems as good a time as any for a fire.”

They gathered wood, built a small blaze, and sat around it together. From his belt, one of the elves drew a slim hunting bow and with three deft shots, brought down a trio of squirrels from the branches above. The catch was skinned, skewered, and roasted over the flames as the scent of meat and Migli smoke filled the air.

Ale was passed around from leather flasks, and soon the fire crackled with the warmth of laughter. Tales were told—of dwarven forges exploding and sending helmets flying like birds, of elven missteps that ended with one falling into a wasps’ nest during a stealthy patrol. The forest seemed to lean in to listen.

Fimly, half-drunk and fully content, looked around the fire and muttered something behind his beard.

“What was that?” Mordil asked, leaning in.

Fimly huffed, blowing foam from his moustache. “Said... maybe not all elves are tree-touched twig-dancers.”

Gurin laughed. “That’s the closest you’ll get to poetry, you hairy boulder.”

The night settled in, and the stars blinked through the gaps in the canopy. No treaties were signed, no borders redrawn, but for a while, the forest was quiet with peace, and dwarves and elves sat together, as they had not done in many lifetimes.

The forests around Millow Point grew quieter with each passing day—not with peace, but with tension, like the stillness before a storm. The sound of birds was often broken by the heavy tread of armored boots or the soft rustle of cloaks through the underbrush. Across the borderlands, patrols from both Eldirin and Goldan moved more frequently, their eyes sharp and hands never far from blade or bow. The friendly fire shared weeks ago under the trees became a fading memory, replaced by fresh bruises and growing suspicion.

At first, it was fists.

Near the split stream of the Glimmerbrook, a dwarven patrol met an elven one—five on five, both surprised to find the other on the same hunting trail. There were words, tense and curt.

“You’re well into our domain,” said the elf captain, slender and stern-eyed. “This path feeds our southern watch.”

“We’ve walked this trail since the camps went up,” answered the dwarven leader, a stout shieldbearer named Ordi. “We’ll not turn back because your map stretches with your mood.”

A shove. A curse. Then fists flew. No steel, not yet. But bloodied noses and split lips marked the day.

Elsewhere, deeper in the woods, near a grove of old ash trees sacred to the elves, a dwarven logging scout was caught measuring trees by an elven patrol. The result was harsher—arrows drawn, axes raised, and a brief skirmish left two elves limping and a dwarf unconscious, dragged back to Goldan with his helm split and pride deeper wounded than his skull.

By mid-moon, blades became quicker to leave sheaths.

North of Millow Point, near a ruined watchpost from centuries past, a dwarven party of seven met an elven patrol of six. The ground was neutral, but no one remembered whose it had once been. A brief attempt at negotiation fell apart.

“This was once a glade of our songs,” said the elven lieutenant.

“And now it’s a trail to our timber camp,” said the dwarven commander. “You should’ve sung louder.”

The clash was brutal. When it ended, the forest was still and quiet again—but five bodies remained behind. Two dwarves and three elves lay dead in the moss, weapons still clutched in rigid hands. Blood soaked the roots. Neither side claimed victory. Both buried their fallen and returned home heavy with silence.

In Eldirin, the weight of the deaths reached the palace swiftly. Captain Elyndor knelt before King Morlen, bloodied scroll in hand, his expression grim.

“Three of ours, your grace. The dwarves lost two. There were witnesses—none dispute the clash.”

King Morlen stood silent for a long time before walking to the window of his high chamber, looking out across the silver-leaved canopy.

“We offered peace,” he said, his voice low. “We welcomed the forest as shared. But their numbers grow and so do their axes.”

Queen Isandra stepped beside him. “The forest is not endless, and hearts are not without limit. Even roots strangle when they cross.”

“Then it is time,” Morlen said. He turned back and took quill and parchment. A proclamation was written, sealed with the mark of Eldirin, and read aloud by the palace herald before the gathered captains.

“By decree of King Morlen of Eldirin, the eastern borders shall be closed to all dwarven passage. No kin of stone shall walk beneath these trees. Let no cart roll, no foot cross, and let none claim ignorance. Patrols shall be doubled. Watch every root and every path.”

The elves obeyed. Patrols were increased, forest rangers armed and rotated daily. Watchposts were fortified with hidden signal fires and horn-callers. Paths once open to travel were now shadowed by hidden eyes and strung with silent warnings.

In Goldan, the news reached King Mugumar in his newly finished council hall, where fresh braziers burned with a blue-tinged flame and the walls bore carvings of mountain conquests.

“Two of ours, brought home on stone planks,” muttered General Drogar, laying down a stained helmet. “They died with honor, but it was not a clean fight. The elves outnumbered them. Their patrols swell.”

Mugumar stood, fists clenched. “They close their woods as if they hold the sky above. Let them do as they will. We will not be fenced.”

He turned to his council. “Increase our patrols. Build new watchpaths. And send a message to every guild—cut only what is needed, but guard our camps with axe and shield. If they come again, they will find we do not fall as leaves in the wind.”

Tensions hung thick in the air. Where once birds sang, now crows circled. The line between forest and stone, once blurred with fire and laughter, now hardened into silence and suspicion. Peace had not yet been buried—but the soil had been turned.

The forest was darker that morning, the light struggling to break through the mist and thick canopy above. Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil moved along a narrow trail near the foot of Millow Point, where moss grew thick on the stones and the trees whispered with a wind that seemed to carry warnings. They were alert—more so than usual. The news of blood spilled across the woods had reached even the Ember Beard. Peace was a tale now, one no longer told in taverns.

As the trail curved near an outcrop of roots and fallen logs, the dwarves stopped. Four elven warriors stood on the path ahead, dressed in green-grey cloaks with curved blades already drawn. The tension was instant and heavy.

“You’ve crossed where no stonewalker should tread,” said one of the elves, his voice cold. “You were warned.”

“And you’ve got no more say over the dirt than we do,” Gurin growled, stepping forward. “We walk to keep our own safe. You don’t want trouble—then step aside.”

“There’s no safety in greed,” the elven leader snapped, stepping forward. “And no warning left to give.”

The silence broke like a branch underfoot.

An arrow flew, missing Fimly’s head by an inch. His axe was already in his hands, and the forest erupted into the roar of steel and grunts. An elven blade struck Fimly hard, knocking him to the ground with a grunt. His massive beard tangled in mud, his eyes wild. For a heartbeat, he lay still—then he roared, a feral sound from deep in his gut, and leapt up with a swing of raw fury.

His axe came down in a single, brutal arc. The elven warrior who had struck him didn’t even cry out—just dropped as Fimly’s axe split helm and skull with a wet crack.

Gurin was locked in a wild struggle with a second elf, mace parried again and again by twin knives. Blood sprayed as one knife sliced his cheek, but with a low growl, Gurin slammed his shield into the elf’s chest, knocking him back, then crushed the side of his head with the mace, iron cracking bone.

Mordil grunted in pain as a dagger sank into his leg. He wrestled the elf to the ground, rolling through the mud and pine needles, before grabbing his warhammer and smashing it down. The blow crumpled the elf’s breastplate, ribs breaking with a sickening crunch.

The last elf turned to flee, wounded and staggering, but Fimly hurled his axe. It spun once—twice—and struck the elf in the back, burying deep. He fell without a sound.

The forest fell still. Blood dripped from blades, soaking into the soil.

Fimly stood over the last body, breathing hard. “Mffph... those damn... mfff...” He spat, beard thick with blood and sweat.

Gurin leaned on his shield, face grim. “Those damn elves have got trees too deep in their brains.”

Mordil sat against a tree, breathing hard. He pulled the dagger from his thigh and grimaced. Then he pulled out his waterskin, uncorked it, and drank the whole thing.

“That was a damn good fight,” he muttered, tossing the empty skin aside.

Far across the woods, another clash tore through the glades. Near the northern banks of the Lyavarel tributary, a dwarven patrol of ten encountered an elven watch group. There were no words—only steel. Five dwarves fell with arrows in their throats and chests, while four elves died by axe and hammer. The battle was brief, brutal, and left the trees stained with crimson. Ravens gathered long before the silence returned.

In the days that followed, the dwarven logging guilds grew bolder. New camps were carved deeper into forest soil, no longer cautious. Bearded sawmen and stone-backed workers felled groves once marked with elven signs, dragging the trunks away with mule and chain.

Dwarven guards now stood with crossbows drawn, watching the trees like they expected the forest itself to rise.

“Cut it fast,” barked Overseer Dolrik to his men. “Elves show their faces, drop the axe and lift the shield.”

No parley was attempted. No words exchanged.

The trees fell in thuds, echoing across lands that no longer knew peace, while both stone and leaf sharpened their edges and watched the horizon with darkening eyes. The woods were still thick, but not with peace—they were thick with hatred now, growing like ivy on a wound.

The Ember Beard tavern roared with the sound of dwarven voices, boots on stone, and the clatter of tankards against oaken tables. Smoke curled from pipes, mingling with the smell of roasted meat, sweat, and fresh-forged iron. In a corner near the great hearth, Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil sat at their usual table—scarred, stained, and sacred only to them. A line of empty mugs already flanked Fimly like trophies of a battle won.

Fimly grabbed a full tankard of dark ale with his thick fingers, tilted it back in one massive gulp, and emptied it in seconds. The liquid poured down through his beard like water over a cliff, splashing onto the floor and soaking his chest. He slammed the mug down with a grunt and let out a belch that turned the heads of two nearby miners.

“Bring us meat!” Mordil bellowed. “And more ale! We’ve had a long week of elf-chopping!”

A tired barkeep came by and placed three platters of roasted boar meat and potatoes on the table, the sauce still steaming. The dwarves dug in like beasts starved from battle, hands greasy, mouths full before a word more was spoken.

Fimly, chewing loudly, stuffed a handful of potatoes somewhere into the cavernous mass of beard where his mouth was presumed to be. The sauce trickled down his moustache like gravy down a mountain ridge.

“They say,” Gurin said between bites, “that yesterday’s skirmish down by the river took fourteen—eight of ours, six of theirs. A slaughter both ways.”

Mordil chuckled, wiping sauce from his chin with the back of his hand. “If they’d stayed home, they’d be singin’ to birds instead of lyin’ face-first in the mud. We warned ‘em.”

“It’s not just the river,” Gurin went on. “Another clash near the eastern trail—twelve dead. Trail runs red. This can’t lead to no good outcome. But we’ve got to stand. We can’t let the bird-lovers scare us from what we need.”

Fimly mumbled something into his beard.

“What’s that?” Gurin asked.

Fimly raised a sauce-drenched hand and made a vague gesture that looked like a tree falling over. “Mffmph... trees don’t feed stone. We feed stone. We cut, we build. They want songs—we want halls.”

At that, Mordil leaned in, grabbed his warhammer from beside him, and kissed the iron head with a grin full of teeth. “Bring it on, I say. My iron will crush their bones deep into the black ground. I’ll knock the poetry right out of their ribs.”

Elsewhere, high in the Stonehall of Goldan, King Mugumar IV stood beneath the newly finished banners of the Ironbone Clans, flanked by his warlords and captains. A thick scroll lay before him, already signed and sealed with his black-ringed hand.

“By decree of the crown,” the herald read aloud, “patrols are to double in number. No less than ten to a company, twenty if roads must be held. If elves come near the logging camps, they are to be driven off with force. If they raise steel, they are to be buried where they fall. No dwarf shall work unguarded, no road shall lie unpatrolled.”

Orders echoed through the mountain like thunder. Shields were strapped tighter, blades sharpened anew. Camps doubled their watch. Mules were escorted by armored warriors. What began as protection was becoming warcraft.

And in the groves of Eldirin, word of the decree reached King Morlen. His brow furrowed, and Queen Isandra stood by the window, listening to the songless wind.

“Then we will match them,” Morlen said coldly. “Send out double patrols. Twelve to a company. Let the trees have witnesses when they fall. We will not be trampled.”

Larger skirmishes soon erupted across the forest. Patrols clashed on narrow trails and shallow rivers. Axes, arrows, and cries of pain echoed between roots and boulders. Ten dead here, fifteen there. Fires lit in memory of the fallen burned nightly in both realms.

Back in the Ember Beard, the party heard the tales roll in with every passing hour. They sat late into the evening, tankards full, bellies full, and blood hot.

“It’s blood now,” Gurin muttered, staring into the fire. “One more season of this and even the trees’ll bleed.”

Fimly reached into his beard, pulled out a chunk of something unidentifiable, sniffed it, shrugged, and popped it into his mouth.

“Mrrrph. Let ‘em come.”

The wind swept low through the pines the day King Mugumar sent his courier across the forest paths. The dwarf rode with haste, clad in dark mail and bearing a scroll bound with red twine and sealed in black wax stamped with the sigil of Goldan. The message was heavy with dust and soot when it arrived at the palace of Eldirin, where golden light filtered through silverleaf canopies and the scent of sage and water lilies filled the air.

King Morlen sat in his high chamber when the scroll was delivered. He broke the seal and unrolled the parchment, his long fingers scanning the rough dwarven runes, the script plain and direct:

“To King Morlen of the Forest Kingdom, from King Mugumar IV the Blackbeard of Goldan:

Blood has soaked root and stone alike. It has gone far enough. Let us speak as kings before more graves are dug.

I invite you to meet me at the Stone of Pinedeep, carved by our folk and blessed by runes, beneath the shadow of the tall pines, on the evening of the full moon to come. Let the wood be witness to what may yet be saved.

Bring whom you will. I shall bring mine. Let there be talk instead of steel.”

Morlen rolled the scroll shut and looked to Queen Isandra. She studied his face for a long moment.

“Well?” she asked.

“There is nothing in stone that cannot be cracked,” he said. “And nothing in speech that cannot be poisoned. But I will go. Better the forest hears our voices than only our swords.”

When the full moon rose, pale and high over the woods, both kings came.

From the north came King Mugumar, on foot, clad in blackened armor chased with silver, his great beard braided into four thick cords. Twenty dwarves marched behind him, shields on their backs, axes strapped tight.

From the south came King Morlen, seated on a wooden throne carved with vines and set upon the shoulders of six elven warriors. He wore robes of green and gold, a circlet of woven birch and emerald upon his brow. He stepped down from the throne silently, his eyes steady.

They met at Pinedeep, the old rock carved with dwarven runes of strength and endurance, its face etched with the names of Goldan’s founders. A circle of clearing lay around it, grass soft underfoot, the pines swaying above.

The two kings stepped forward. Their warriors watched in silence, hands near hilts.

Morlen extended his hand. “King of Stone.”

Mugumar took it firmly. “King of Leaf.”

Their hands fell away, and the air between them tightened.

“Let us speak plainly,” Mugumar said. “This forest war cannot last. Too many have died. Dwarf and elf alike bleed the same. We are not here to trade insults. We need a solution.”

“Aye,” said Morlen. “But peace does not mean the ruin of our lands. Your axes come where no roots have forgotten song. Your camps spread, your carts cut deeper.”

Mugumar's brow furrowed. "We need the wood, elf. We build homes, forges, lives. You hold a forest that could house three cities and give up not a twig. What would you have us do? Starve in the stone while your deer drink sweet water?"

Morlen's voice grew sharp. "The forest is not your storehouse. It lives, it breathes, it remembers. You take and take and call it need, but what do you give?"

"We give sweat. We give strength. We give stone for wood, iron for silence," Mugumar snapped. "But your kind sees every branch as sacred and every log as a wound."

"And your kind sees only timber and ore," Morlen said coldly. "You hear no voice but your own echo in the tunnels."

The wind shifted, the warriors behind them tense.

"If your head was not a stump," Mugumar growled, "you would understand what I am telling you."

Morlen's eyes flashed. "If you were tall enough to see above your head, you would not cause so much trouble to the elven folk."

Mugumar spat onto the ground. "So be it then. It is blood to blood. We will take the forest we need, and no elf will sing laws at us."

Morlen's jaw tightened. "Then let the stronger side decide whose claim stands. But the forest will not fall quietly."

Neither king bowed.

They turned in silence and walked back to their lines. The clearing grew cold behind them, the moonlight casting pale silver over the old stone of Pinedeep. Behind both lines, warriors turned and followed their kings into the dark, the roots beneath their boots already thirsty for what would come.

The forest groaned with blood. Weeks had passed since the failed parley at Pinedeep, and now there was no more veil of diplomacy, no talk of treaties or balance. Each patrol that crossed the borders did so with hands on hilts and death in their eyes. The woods around Millow Point, once shared in silence, now echoed with the clash of steel and the cries of the dying.

On one grim dawn, Giri Stonefist, cousin to King Mugumar and a famed warrior in Goldan's halls, led a patrol of ten dwarves through the foothills east of the timber camps. Broad of shoulder and clad in a breastplate carved with his family's crest—a hammer atop a broken peak—Giri moved with certainty, his war axe strapped to his back, a heavy mace at his side. His men were seasoned, their armor dented but their resolve unbent.

"We stay close," Giri said, his voice low. "Elves haunt these trails like ghosts in the trees. We see movement, we don't wait. We strike."

The patrol wound through thick woods, broken only by ancient game trails and fresh-cut logging paths. But as they rounded a bend near a stone rise, movement flashed between the trunks.

Twelve elves stepped from the brush, cloaked in bark-tinted cloaks, blades drawn, bows lowered only to reveal their faces. Their leader, a tall elf named Thalrion, raised a hand.

“Dwarves,” he called. “Step back. The forest will not let you pass again.”

“Then let it try and stop us!” Giri roared, and the dwarves charged.

The fight exploded with steel and fire. Arrows loosed from the elven side pierced dwarven shoulders and necks, but the dwarves crashed in like a storm. Giri’s mace cracked the helm of the first elf he met, folding it like parchment and dropping the warrior in a single blow. An elven sword struck a dwarf’s gut, slicing through mail, but the dwarf fell forward with a dagger in hand, burying it into the elf’s thigh before they both went down.

Axes whirled. Maces smashed. Elven blades flashed with elegance, parried, then bit deep through chain. Helmets cracked open like eggs under stone. A dwarf was lifted off his feet by a spear to the chest; an elf had his legs taken from under him by a swinging hammer, then his head crushed under a boot.

Blood soaked the mossy floor. Shields splintered. Roars and screams filled the clearing.

Giri fought like a mountain enraged. He crushed three elves in quick succession, even with a deep cut across his thigh. His beard was slick with blood, and his breath came in snarls.

Only one elf still stood—Thalrion, bloodied and panting, his armor cracked, but his blade sharp. Giri raised his mace and charged.

“Your kind will be dust in the stone!” he bellowed.

Thalrion ducked the first swing, caught the second on the edge of his blade, and stepped inside Giri’s reach. With a swift motion, he drew a long curved knife from his belt and, before Giri could react, slashed it across his throat.

Giri stumbled, gurgled, then dropped to his knees.

Thalrion raised his sword high and brought it down with both hands, cleaving Giri’s head from his shoulders.

The dwarf’s body slumped into the blood-soaked earth. The final blow echoed across the glade.

Of the dwarven patrol, only one remained alive—a miner-turned-scout named Thurik. Bleeding from his side and dragging a broken leg, he crawled through the underbrush, teeth clenched, vision blurred. It took him nearly a day to reach the nearest dwarven outpost.

When the news reached Goldan, it struck like an avalanche. King Mugumar stood silent as Thurik collapsed before him, clutching Giri's rune-marked axe.

"They took his head, my king," Thurik rasped. "Left nothing but blood."

Mugumar's roar shook the hall. "GIRI!"

The next hours were chaos. Commanders gathered around the great stone table of Goldan, maps unrolled, voices raised.

"We dig ditches—spiked, deep. They will not take another step unpunished," barked Warlord Brogar. "Every path, every camp, watched day and night."

"Ten is no longer enough. Patrols of twenty—no less," growled another.

Mugumar slammed his fist onto the stone. "Build death in the ground. No root they hide beneath will save them. If they wish to bleed, we'll give them rivers of it."

Orders flew. Ditches were dug and lined with wooden spikes, soaked in pitch. Traps were built along paths—false trails, collapsing pits, and jagged rocks hidden beneath leaves. Logging camps were turned into fortresses, guarded round the clock by armored dwarves, crossbows always loaded.

In the woods, the elves answered with silence and shadow. Patrols doubled, their numbers now twelve or more. Warriors cloaked themselves in leaf and bark, vanishing into the woods until only a shimmer in the air betrayed their presence. They set traps of their own—thin wires across trails, spring-loaded spikes hidden in brush, pits lined with sharpened steelwood stakes.

Dwarves who wandered alone did not return.

Even the hunters now walked with drawn swords, their quarry no longer just stag or boar.

In every clearing, trail, and streambank, blood soaked the roots, and every step carried a risk of death. The forest had become a battlefield, and both stone and leaf had buried their hopes beneath the soil.

The months that followed turned the forest into a place of endless mourning. Clashes between dwarves and elves became as constant as the rustling of leaves. No day passed without steel being drawn, blood being spilled. On three separate occasions, patrols led by close cousins of both King Mugumar and King Morlen met their ends in the woods, their bodies found crushed, skewered, or unrecognizable, left sprawled among roots and brambles. The weight of kinblood was the final drop into the chalice.

Neither king would suffer insult nor loss further. Word went out through both realms—summon warriors, sword arms, shield bearers. The dwarves of Goldan, clad in mail and steel, five hundred strong, assembled in a thunderous procession that shook the paths with their march. Behind them rolled carts of weapons, shields, and siege tools, pulled by grunting

mules and guarded by hammer-wielding smith-warriors. At the front rode King Mugumar IV himself, armored in blackened iron, helm crowned with silver spikes, his warhammer across his lap like a slumbering beast.

From the green halls of Eldirin, five hundred elven warriors answered the call, cloaked in twilight colors, blades curved and polished, bows strung with horse-hair cords, arrows fletched with owl-feathers. They moved like wind over the forest, silent and swift, their eyes burning with loss. At their head walked King Morlen, cloaked in gold-threaded green, a tall sword sheathed at his side and a crown of antler upon his brow.

The field near the river, once a grazing plain for deer and a meeting place for wandering traders, was now to be the place of reckoning. The river Lyavarel split the field at the edge, slow and deep, its surface catching the morning light. Both armies arrived at dawn, their banners rising high—oak-leaf green for the elves, iron-grey and crimson for the dwarves.

No words were exchanged. No herald rode to speak of terms. There were no horns of warning. Only the stare across the trampled grass, and then the scream of metal.

The dwarves advanced in disciplined lines, shields locked, axes and hammers raised. The elves answered with flight and motion, loosing volleys of arrows that thudded into shields and slammed into helms. The dwarves roared and surged, their front lines smashing into the elven vanguard with the force of a rockfall.

The clash was deafening.

Steel rang, bones cracked. An elven blade flashed across a dwarf's throat; a warhammer crushed an elven skull, helmet splitting like bark. The riverbank ran slick with blood. The dwarves pushed forward with stubborn strength, unrelenting, but the elves danced around them, cutting at gaps in armor, slipping past with speed and precision. Spears darted. Shields splintered.

Screams echoed under the sun.

A dwarf fell to his knees, pierced with five arrows. An elf was thrown into the river by a mace blow that shattered his ribs. An elven captain and a dwarven lieutenant locked in a savage duel ended with both falling upon each other's blades, dying with hands clenched around hilts.

The ground was churned mud and blood, the field scattered with bodies. For hours they fought, until the war cries grew hoarse and arms failed from exhaustion. As the sun neared its fall, only the wounded remained—around fifty from each side, limping, crawling, staggering from the field, some dragging comrades, others clutching stumps of arms or trailing entrails.

No victory was had. No claim was made.

The field fell into silence. Crows began to gather.

The next morning, under grey skies, both realms sent their dead collectors. Elves with tearful songs carried their fallen on stretchers of woven branches. Dwarves, grim and silent, hauled their kin with chains and carts. There was no fighting, no words exchanged. Just glances—tired, bitter, haunted.

The earth swallowed the dead in shallow graves dug into the torn field. Graves marked only by piles of broken weapons or shields. No tombs, no names. Just silence and soil.

The river Lyavarel flowed on, slow and cold, its waters red-tinged beneath the rising sun, as if the forest itself mourned.

The forest had grown restless since the great battle. Though the main armies had returned to their holds, the woods remained a battlefield, veiled now in silence and shadow. Smaller patrols still moved beneath the canopy, and steel still whispered through the trees. There was no peace, only pauses between blood.

One mist-veiled night, Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil crept through the thick underbrush, their boots muffled by damp leaves. The moon was thin above, barely casting light through the boughs, and every step was watched, every breath shallow. They were deep past Millow Point, watching the eastern path that wound near an abandoned logging route.

Suddenly, the crunch of movement—soft, deliberate—caught their ears. Fimly held up a hand, and the party slipped silently into a cluster of bushes. They crouched low, weapons ready, breath held.

Fifteen elves moved through the forest, cloaked in bark-colored garb, their boots whispering against moss. Their leader moved ahead, scanning the trail with eyes that pierced the dark. One elf passed within a foot of Mordil, his head turning just slightly—but not enough to see them. The party stayed still, statues in the bramble.

The elves lingered, investigating the area with careful, trained eyes, then slowly faded down the trail like smoke on the wind.

The dwarves waited for some time. Soon another sound—softer, closer—alerted them.

A smaller group. Five elves this time, lightly armed, walking confidently.

Fimly rose from the bush and stepped onto the path.

“Hold there!” he growled.

The elves froze.

Blades were drawn on both sides, and the moment cracked open with fury.

Gurin charged first, shield up, mace swinging low. He struck an elf’s leg, snapping bone, and drove the spiked head into his chest with a brutal follow-up blow. Mordil blocked a strike with his warhammer, twisted, and slammed the weapon into the elf’s face, caving in helm and skull in a single strike.

Fimly let out a garbled war-cry, beard soaked from dew and sweat, his axe flashing in the moonlight. He buried it into the side of an elf, then yanked it free with a sound like tearing bark.

One elf tried to retreat into the trees—an arrow on his string—but Mordil grabbed him by the collar and slammed him into a tree trunk. The arrow flew wild. The warhammer did not.

The last elf stood his ground, blade held high, panting. He slashed across Gurin's arm, but Fimly tackled him from the side, wrestling him to the ground and pinning him. His axe rose, then fell.

Silence again.

Five elves lay broken on the path, and the party stood over them, catching their breath.

"Damn quiet for such a loud night," Mordil muttered, wiping blood off his hammer.

Elsewhere in the woods, the night had its own tragedies. A lone dwarf scout wandered too far, not seeing the thin wire strung across a deer path. A trap snapped. The ground gave way beneath him. He fell into a pit lined with wooden spikes. The thud echoed through the trees, then silence. Another death marked by nothing more than the wind.

Later that same night, as the moon reached its peak, the party stumbled upon a camp. Flickering flames, the scent of pipeweed and warmth in the air. Elves.

The same ones they had once shared ale and tales with.

At first, weapons were drawn. Elves stood, tense. Dwarves crouched, braced for another fight.

Then Fimly, eyes squinting through the thick of his moustache, laughed.

"Hoho...mffph...friends...let's make another fire."

The elves paused—then one, Linthal, the friendly leader from before, laughed aloud.

"You hairy rock," he said. "You still speak like a forge wrapped in moss."

Weapons lowered. Smiles, tentative but real, returned.

The party helped build the fire. Pipeweed was lit, ale passed around, and for a moment, the war was far away.

"This conflict," Linthal said, staring into the firelight, "it's madness. Needles of hatred in every branch. Why can't the others find a common tongue and solve the quarrel? Too much blood spilled for no gain."

Mordil, blowing smoke from his pipe, nodded. "This comes down to people thinking they own something. That trees and rivers wear names. If no one claimed to own anything, there wouldn't be anything to fight over. Greed, that's what it is—plain and hard."

The elves nodded. They sat, talked, and passed the flask again.

Fimly grunted something unintelligible and threw another handful of nuts or potatoes—or maybe pipe ash—into his beard. The others laughed.

They stayed there until the embers burned low. Then the dwarves stood, nodding.

“No blades between us,” Gurin said.

“None,” Linthal replied. “Not tonight. Not ever again.”

They parted in silence, two parties stepping into different shadows, carrying a sliver of peace where none should be.

In the heart of Eldirin, life moved with the rhythm of both purpose and beauty, a dance between daily grace and the ever-looming weight of war. Though the shadow of conflict thickened beyond the tree line, within the city’s woven halls and glowing walkways, the elven folk clung to the familiar rhythm of their lives, as if to hold the peace in place a moment longer.

In the high forges near the eastern branch of the city, hammers rang out in melodic rhythm. The smiths, bare-armed and soot-marked, worked with precision and flow, as though the metal itself understood the elegance of their craft. Chainmail gleamed under the morning light pouring through the canopy. One smith, Aralir, grunted as he cooled a newly forged helmet in a trough of misted water.

“Three more sets for the river patrol, and I’ll have to request more moonsteel from the storehouse,” he said, wiping his brow with a cloth.

Beside him, a younger apprentice struggled to affix a cheek-guard to a helmet. Aralir reached over and adjusted it with a quick twist. “There—tighten the rivet, not your shoulders.”

Across the training fields woven between the high-rooted trees, the air thrummed with discipline. Archers lined up in formation, drawing back their bows in sync. The thud of arrows striking straw targets was constant. Others sparred with practice blades, their tunics damp with sweat, footwork precise and elegant.

Commander Caelhon, a hardened elf with a hawk’s stare, strode among them, barking orders with sharp authority. “You take too long on your draw! Again! A breath can be your death if you're slow. Patrols move along the southern bend—watch for river crossings. Blades to the ready before foot to the trail!”

At the high pavilion of leaves and silverwood, King Morlen stood over a large carved map of the borderlands with his commanders. Dressed in a robe of moss-green and gold thread, his hands rested on the hilt of his ceremonial sword.

“Another large clash is coming,” Morlen said, eyes narrowed. “It is no longer a question of if. Only when. The dwarves are digging in, setting ditches, guarding their lumber paths like war-fronts.”

A captain to his left nodded grimly. “And our scouts report fresh stone walls rising around their camps. They do not fortify for peace.”

“We must be ready,” Morlen said. “But we do not lose ourselves to hatred. We are not beasts of rage—we defend what is ours.”

Beneath the lofty halls, the city bustled with its own quiet rhythm. Along the main bridge crossing the Lyavarel River, merchants laid out bolts of fine cloth, jars of spices, dried fruits, and baskets of freshly baked leafbread. An old trader in a blue sash called out, “Riverplums from the southern groves! Sweet as honey and rare as calm days!”

A young elven girl darted through the market, laughing, her small fox darting behind her like a flame-tailed shadow. She weaved through legs and baskets, nearly knocking over a stall.

“Elliara!” a woman called, shaking her head but smiling. “Watch where you run, child. That fox will lead you into the roots one day.”

Down by the riverbank, women knelt on smooth stones, washing clothes in the clear water. They sang softly, ancient hymns to the river spirit, hands steady, movements practiced.

“I heard my brother’s patrol returned late again,” one woman said. “They say the dwarves have set spiked pits near the ash grove.”

Another answered, “And we set our own snares in return. It’s not a war, they say, but the river runs red some mornings.”

On the far side of the river, a woodsmith named Elenrin sat cross-legged before a block of dark oak, chisel in hand. His fingers were quick, carving the slender form of Mildith, the goddess of forest renewal and hidden springs. Her face began to emerge in the wood, eyes closed, arms stretched to the skies.

“She keeps watch, even in war,” Elenrin whispered to himself, brushing away a curl of bark. “May her roots hold us steady.”

A small boat moved gently across the Lyavarel, rowed by an elderly elf with long white hair tied back in a silver clasp. He guided passengers from one bank to another, never rushing, his strokes smooth and silent.

“One at a time, now,” he said as a few traders stepped aboard. “And mind your baskets, the river’s been hungry of late.”

Eldirin lived, and breathed, and remembered. While war stirred beyond the trees, the city beneath the leaves still clung to what made it whole—its songs, its stories, and the gentle pulse of its ancient rhythm.

In the black belly of the mountain, within the war hall of Goldan, torches burned low and cast flickering shadows over the runed stone walls. King Mugumar IV the Blackbeard stood before a massive stone table carved in the shape of the surrounding valleys and ridges. His iron-gauntleted hand rested atop the wooden marker representing the elven city of Eldirin.

"Enough," he growled, voice like gravel grinding under boot. "We've bled on roots and moss long enough. This time, we strike not with shields raised, but with stone-cut precision."

He turned to his commander, General Drogar Ironskull.

"Gather two thousand troops. Tonight, we break their lines. We move in two flanks, one under me. We hit them from both sides in the dark, when they're still warming their beds with songs and dreams. No horns, no drums—just steel. Move."

Drogar saluted, his iron beard-rings clinking. "Aye, my king. The hammers will sing."

The general stormed into the barracks, voice roaring through the sleeping halls.

"Up! All of you! Armor on, weapons sharp—we move at dusk! Two battalions, two paths! We meet the leaf-born with steel!"

Steel rang on stone as warriors scrambled to don their chainmail and plate. Halls that once echoed with ale songs now shook with the rhythm of war preparation. Crates of axes and hammers were cracked open, shields handed out, helmets strapped. Dwarves lined up with eyes hard, jaws clenched.

By twilight, two columns of dwarves were descending from the mountain keep. One moved through the western ridge, the other through the rocky southern ravines, both formations slipping into the forest like iron shadows. King Mugumar marched at the head of the southern battalion, his massive warhammer strapped across his back, the crest of Goldan gleaming on his breastplate.

"Keep low, keep silent," Mugumar hissed. "We bring them ruin, not song."

But the forest is never truly quiet. An elven scout, perched in the crook of an old pine, caught the shimmer of mail under moonlight. His breath hitched. He raised a horn carved of stag bone and blew three sharp blasts that echoed through the canopy like a crow's scream.

In Eldirin, the sound cracked the night.

"Three blasts," a guard cried. "Large movement. Dwarves. More than a raiding band!"

Torches lit, warriors rushed through the tree halls, strapping on armor and loading quivers. King Morlen stood from his seat with sword in hand before the call had faded. His brow was dark, his voice swift.

"All to arms! Form ranks at the southern gate—one thousand five hundred. We cannot wait. Meet them before the roots are soaked again."

He stepped into his bronze-leafed breastplate fit for his fat stomach, pulled his helmet over his dark hair, and strapped his sword across his back. By the time the gates opened, his warriors were lined up, and he led them himself, boots barely touching the paths as they ran into the dark.

The first battalion of dwarves struck just as the elves reached the heart of the pine groves. The night erupted in shouts and screams, steel flashing between shadows. The forest shook.

Axes crashed into spears. Arrows thudded into mail. Elves moved like wind, but the dwarves came like a landslide—shield walls braced, pushing forward with brute force.

A dwarven warrior roared and brought his hammer down on an elven helm, splitting it and the skull beneath. An elven blade flashed and slashed a dwarf's throat, blood spilling into the moss.

King Morlen moved through the lines, sword a blur of silver. "Hold the line!" he shouted. "Let the trees stand with us!"

But even as they pushed the first wave back, the second came.

Mugumar's battalion crashed into the left flank of the elven force like an avalanche from the mountain.

"Push, lads!" Mugumar roared, his hammer rising high. "Break 'em like dry twigs!"

The dwarves hit hard, axes cleaving into ribs, maces shattering kneecaps. Elves screamed as they fell under the crushing assault. Shields broke. Bones snapped. Blood splattered bark and leaf.

One dwarf tackled an elven captain to the ground, headbutting him until his face caved in. Another elf leapt from a low branch, blade drawn—but Mugumar caught him mid-air, hammer sweeping across and caving his chest into pulp.

Morlen saw the flank collapse.

"Back!" he shouted. "Pull back to the riverside—regroup! We must not let them encircle us!"

But the dwarves pressed on, unrelenting.

The battle lasted until the trees were black with blood. By dawn, the ground was soaked and strewn with broken armor, cracked weapons, and the dead. Only around fifty dwarves and fifty elves, wounded and limping, crawled from the ruin.

The forest lay still. Crows circled.

No songs were sung that day. Only silence spoke.

Among the charred trunks and blood-slicked roots, the last remnants of the elven and dwarven forces clashed with fading breath. The ground was a tangle of broken bodies, shattered shields, and spent arrows. Those still standing did so only through sheer hatred or

stubbornness. The forest groaned under the weight of iron and bone, and the rising sun cast no warmth on that cursed grove.

In the heart of it all, King Mugumar IV and King Morlen met face to face beneath the arching limbs of an ancient ash. Both bore wounds, their armor dented, blood staining steel and silk alike.

Morlen raised his sword, teeth clenched. "This will be the end of you, evil small folk. The trees will be set free from your bitter axes."

Mugumar spat at his feet, the saliva mixing with blood-soaked soil. "End of us? You crawling maggot of an elf. We'll see who ends today. Your elven tree sap has poisoned your mind."

Then steel sang.

Their blades met with a shriek of metal, sparks flying as axe and sword crashed together. Mugumar swung with brute strength, every blow heavy and brutal, sending shockwaves down Morlen's arms. Morlen, quicker, despite his fat body, weaved and twisted, dodging hammering strikes and lashing out with precise cuts, slicing Mugumar's cheek, nicking his side.

"You move fast for a corpse," Mugumar growled, swinging low. Morlen parried, then stepped in, striking a shallow slash across the dwarf king's brow.

"Better a swift death than a slow rot," Morlen hissed.

But fatigue crept in. Their men were either dead or scattered. The woods watched in silence.

Then Mugumar feinted a swing, dropped his axe, and in a flash, pulled a dagger from his belt. With a grunt and a forward lunge, he drove it deep into Morlen's stomach.

Steel met flesh. The elf king gasped.

Blood bloomed across his tunic, thick and dark. His legs gave way.

"No," Morlen breathed, panic rising in his eyes. "No… this can't be the end of me."

He turned and fled into the deeper woods, hand clutched over the wound. Mugumar followed, relentless, his boots crushing fallen branches as he tracked the king deeper into the shadowed grove.

Morlen stumbled, his breath ragged, leaving a trail of blood on the leaves. He fell to his knees, staggered to his feet again, then dropped to all fours. "I… will not die here…". He rised again, barely able to walk.

He staggered through the undergrowth, each step weaker than the last, his blood leaking like spilled wine over the forest floor, panting heavily. His hand pressed hard against the wound in his stomach, warm and wet, but already he could feel the strength draining from his limbs,

the cold creeping up through his boots into his bones. His breath came in shallow gasps, more a rasp than a breath, each inhale sharp with pain, each exhale tinged with the taste of iron.

The forest around him twisted and blurred, the once-familiar trees now towering above like sentinels carved of ancient grief. He looked up, neck trembling, and through a jagged break in the canopy he saw a shard of the morning sky—pale blue, streaked with mist, so distant it felt like another world. The sunlight filtered through, dim and cold, more memory than warmth.

He stumbled forward, his boot catching a root. He fell to one knee, groaning, fingers clawing at the damp moss to steady himself. It was soft beneath his palms, rich with the scent of old rain and leaf rot. There was a silence in the air now—not peace, but the hush of endings. No birds sang. Even the wind had stilled.

A crow crackled in the distance. Sharp. Brief. Then gone.

Morlen forced himself to rise. His legs shook like reeds. He stepped forward again, and his foot landed on a brittle branch. It cracked under his weight with a sharp snap, loud as thunder in the stillness. He flinched, head snapping toward the sound, as if it were not his own doing. Sweat stung his eyes. The trees no longer seemed to watch—they loomed, cold and uncaring.

Death was coming. He felt it—curling like smoke through his chest, tightening his limbs, dulling his sight. His sword hung loose in its scabbard, forgotten. His thoughts drifted—not to glory, not to vengeance—but to quiet things: the voice of his queen, the rustle of leaves in Eldirin's gardens, the laughter of a child chasing a fox through the market.

He pressed on. A few more steps. A few more heartbeats. But already the darkness was circling, silent and sure.

The forest around him had grown cold, damp, the trees twisted and close, suffocating in their silence. He collapsed beside a rotting log, hand shaking, breath shallow, staring upward through a narrow break in the canopy where a single shaft of light filtered through.

Then Mugumar arrived, dagger still stained. He stepped closer slowly, towering over the fallen elf.

"There you crawled," he said, voice thick. "To the last spot suitable for a maggot."

Morlen's eyes met his once more, wide with pain, fury, and the last flickers of pride. Then his chest stopped rising. His head fell to the side.

Silence.

Mugumar stood still, dagger in hand, chest rising slowly as the final breaths of battle left him. He looked down at the dead king, the shadow of the trees cutting across his face. The forest gave no judgment, no witness, only the creaking of old branches.

After a long moment, Mugumar turned, breathing steady, and walked back the way he had come, leaving only the body of a king and the dark woods to remember.

The forest clearing was thick with the stench of blood and ash. The morning light filtered weakly through the smoke-hazed canopy, illuminating the broken forms of elves and dwarves strewn across the battlefield like felled branches. King Mugumar trudged through the silence, his boots squelching in the soaked moss, his axe heavy at his side, blood still crusting its edge.

Among the corpses, a single dwarf stirred—a grizzled warrior crawling weakly through the grass, one arm bent unnaturally and blood streaking his temple. Mugumar knelt beside him.

“You still draw breath,” Mugumar muttered, gripping the dwarf’s shoulder.

“Aye… just barely, my king,” the dwarf rasped, his eyes fogged but burning with pride.

Mugumar helped him up, supporting him over his shoulder. The two staggered toward the trail that led back to Goldan, the forest watching in hushed silence, their footsteps the only sound left in the wake of war.

When they reached the outer gates of the mountain keep, horns sounded and guards rushed forward, voices raised in relief and awe.

“The king returns!”

“Open the gate!”

Mugumar handed the wounded dwarf off to the healers waiting near the stone arch. He staggered into the main hall, soot-smeared, bloody, triumphant. Commanders gathered quickly, their armor still dusty, their eyes wide with expectation.

Mugumar stepped onto the stone dais, raised his axe with one hand, and declared in a hoarse but proud voice, “King Morlen of the elves is dead.”

Cheers erupted through the chamber. The commanders pounded their mugs and axes against tables and shields. “To the mountain! To the stone! To the king!”

A servant rushed forward with a heavy mug of dark red wine, nearly black in the torchlight. Mugumar grabbed it, downed it in one long pull, then slammed it onto the table.

“To the power of the mountain folk!”, he bellowed.

Another mug was pressed into his hand and he drank again, faster this time. The hall roared with laughter and cries of victory. The wine flowed freely, toasts flying through the air, tales of the final battle already being shaped in myth.

Meanwhile, in the Ember Beard tavern, the fire crackled low as Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil sat hunched over a platter of roast deer and a bowl of wild greens. Their armor was dented, their beards still stained in places, but their mugs were full and spirits high.

Fimly raised his drink with a grunt. “Cheers… mfff… to—”

“What was that?” Gurin asked, brow furrowed.

“I think,” Mordil said with a smirk, “he said cheers to the victory!”

They clanged mugs together and drank.

“It was basically only the king standing in the end and one other poor bastard,” Gurin muttered. “That was a hell of a battle.”

Fimly nodded solemnly. “We were fightin’ hard on the eastern flank… just twenty of us left. I saw the axe take a commander’s head clean off. Few of us made it through this one.”

“A mug to remember the fallen!” Gurin cried, raising his tankard high.

“Aye!” they all shouted and drank again.

Gurin leaned back, wiping foam from his lip. “Wonder if the new elven king’s got more reason in him. Maybe it’s time someone ends this madness.”

Mordil shrugged. “Depends if he’s root or leaf. Either way, we’ll be here—with our mugs full and axes sharp.”

And so they drank, while beyond the mountain, the forest mourned quietly under the sky, waiting to see what name would next be etched in the bark of history.

The forest was still as the elven patrol moved deeper into the blackened grove. The sun barely pierced the tangled canopy here, the trees twisted and heavy with silence. For hours they had searched, whispers and rumors leading them to the darker reaches of the wood. And there, beneath the leaning limbs of a dying oak and beside a rotting log, they found him.

King Morlen.

His form slumped, lifeless, blood caked across his once-proud robes, the wound in his stomach blackened with dried blood. His head rested back against the moss, eyes closed as if merely asleep. But there was no breath, no warmth. His sword lay beside him, untouched.

The elves stood in stunned silence before one knelt, tears streaming down his face.

"Bring him home," the captain said, voice thick with grief. "Let the forest see him returned."

They lifted him gently, cradling the heavy body of their fallen king, and began the slow, mournful march back to Eldirin.

In the days that followed, a strange hush fell over the land. Neither elves nor dwarves raised a weapon. No skirmishes, no patrols clashing. The dead littered glades and hillocks alike, and both sides turned inward to mourn and bury. It was an unsaid truce—not peace, but pause. The dead demanded it.

In Eldirin, thousands gathered beneath the great silverwood tree at the center of the city. Cloaked in black and green, they stood in silence as the body of Morlen was laid upon a raised pyre of oak and silverleaf, surrounded by garlands of white vines and forest lilies.

Queen Isandra stood at the forefront, her face pale, eyes rimmed with tears. The High Seeress stepped forward, arms outstretched, her voice echoing over the hushed crowd.

"Here lies Morlen, son of Thalanor, Lord of the Leaves, Warden of the Lyavarel, King of Eldirin for one hundred and twelve years. He walked in shadow and sun, held peace in his hands, and faced war with an unbending heart. He now returns to the forest, where all begin, where all end."

Flames were lit. The pyre caught slowly, then roared into golden fire. The gathered elves raised their voices in a low, keening song that wound through the trees like a mourning wind. As the flames consumed the body, silence returned.

The ashes were gathered carefully into a stone urn carved with vines and runes, and placed aboard a slender riverboat of birch and silverwood. The boat was unmoored at twilight and pushed into the current of the Lyavarel. As it drifted downstream, lanterns floated behind it, hundreds of soft golden lights trailing the king into the unknown.

Some wept. Others bowed their heads. All watched until the river swallowed the last flicker of flame.

Then came the vow.

"We mourn not in silence," said General Kaelhon to the gathered warriors. "We mourn with blade. For every drop of blood our king gave, we will return in kind. Dwarves will remember his name—and fear it."

Days later, in a solemn ceremony beneath the high boughs, Elrond, son of Morlen, stood before the great stone altar. He wore silver armor adorned with gold leaf, a circlet of steelwood upon his brow. The council chanted in unison, and as he placed his hand upon the Heartroot Stone, his voice rang out.

"I swear upon my father’s memory, upon the name of our house, and the roots of Eldirin itself, I shall carry the weight of crown and vengeance. Let none forget the face of betrayal."

The elves bowed. The forest, too, seemed to hush.

That night, Elrond stood alone in his chamber, pacing. The flicker of candlelight danced on the carved maps laid across the table—valleys, rivers, peaks. Patrol routes. Supply lines. Borders.

He stared long at the markings, jaw clenched.

“My father’s blood is still warm in that soil,” he muttered. “And they drink and cheer over his corpse.”

He traced his finger over the mountain paths leading to Goldan.

His eyes were hard now. And behind them, the storm of vengeance brewed.

A Spark of Peace

In the shadow of war's fading thunder, something unexpected began to grow—life. Beyond the blood-soaked glades and the command halls of kings, the common folk, tired of endless death, began to look to the earth, to the rivers, and to each other.

Small villages sprang up between Goldan and Eldirin, nestled in valleys and by stream-fed clearings. Some bore elven names, lyrical and soft, like Liraeth and Faenloren; others were sturdy, grounded dwarven settlements like Brumblehold and Tharn's Fork. But more and more, they mixed—stones and trees standing side by side, paths lined with both moss and gravel.

Near the banks of the Lyavarel, a riverside market bloomed where once patrols had clashed. Dwarves in thick aprons hauled barrels of dark ale and sacks of flour from goat-pulled carts, while elven traders unpacked fragrant herbs, linen rolls, and crates of gleaming vegetables fresh from their forest gardens.

"Two sacks of barley for that cask of ale," grunted a dwarf named Tarmik, wiping sweat from his brow.

A tall elf with a sun-bleached braid nodded. "Done. But you toss in a smoked ham and I'll throw in some wild garlic and a bottle of honeysap."

Tarmik laughed. "You drive a better bargain than some dwarven wives. Deal."

Children—pointy-eared and bearded alike—chased one another through rows of carts, their laughter mixing in a language neither side had taught them, but both understood. A young elf and a dwarf boy sat side by side on a fence, sharing a roasted root vegetable as they watched millstones grind fresh flour nearby.

Riverside mills turned with slow, steady rhythm. Dwarven-built mechanisms powered by flowing water ground wheat brought in from newly cultivated fields, while elven artisans lined gardens with herbs, squash, cabbage, and vine vegetables.

"We'll need more hands for the planting," said Eliril, an elf gardener, brushing dirt from her hands. "The forest soil is rich. Barley grows well near the tree lines."

"We've more lads from Tharn's Fork coming down next week," said a dwarf with a shovel slung over his shoulder. "Some even bringing families. We'll trade tools for seeds, like before."

Along the trails between the cities, carts rolled more frequently. Baskets of mushrooms and roots from Eldirin were exchanged for stone-cut tools and iron fittings from Goldan. In some places, dwarves and elves even built homes beside one another, garden plots stretching between them, the scent of baking bread and woodsmoke drifting into the open air.

In one such village, an elf sat beneath a willow, playing a gentle tune on a reed flute. A dwarf beside him leaned against the same tree, sipping from a wooden mug.

“You ever think,” the elf mused, “how odd it is… we’ve bled for these lands, and yet it’s the ones who didn’t lift a sword who now build the most.”

The dwarf chuckled. “Aye. Makes me think maybe kings should grow carrots instead of swinging axes.”

The elf smiled. “Might be a quieter world.”

The dwarf raised his mug. “To quiet fields and stubborn neighbors who make good stew.”

They drank, and the sun dipped low over the green hills, casting long shadows that, for once, carried no threat—only the promise of another morning.

In the deep stone halls of Goldan, King Mugumar IV sat at a broad writing desk hewn from black slate, the flame of a single lantern casting his stout shadow on the wall behind. His beard, streaked now with more grey than before, shifted gently as he leaned over the parchment, quill in hand. The war had taken its toll—on both sides—and though the fires of vengeance still burned, a quieter wisdom had begun to settle in his chest.

He wrote with a heavy but steady hand:

“To King Elrond of the Forest Realm of Eldirin,

Let us speak plainly. Enough blood has been spilled into the roots and soil of our shared lands. Too many fathers have buried sons. Too many fires have died in homes that should have known peace.

We propose the drawing of a border, clear and agreed upon. Let the line fall at Millow Point —beyond it, each of our folk shall claim no more. The dwarves will not cut beyond the line, nor shall elves tread armed across it.

Know this: if our timber runs low, we may yet seek parley. But let that be talk before steel. Let peace be drawn, even if short-lived.

—King Mugumar IV, Lord of Goldan, Voice of the Stone”

He sealed the letter with black wax and handed it to a trusted envoy. “Go,” Mugumar said. “Ride fast, speak fair, and let them know we still honor the old ways.”

The dwarf crossed the valleys and open meadows, where wildflowers now bloomed between old battlefields, arriving at the gates of Eldirin by late evening. The elf guards received the message without tension, and the scroll was passed to King Elrond.

Elrond, seated in his hall of woven branches and high glassleaf windows, read the letter in silence. His jaw tightened, but he gave no immediate reply. When he had read it twice, he folded it carefully and looked out across the twilight-lit canopy.

“Send them our answer,” he said to his steward. “A border line, from the riverbend to Millow Point. Nothing beyond it. Let them agree to that—and nothing more.”

The envoy was dispatched swiftly with a map, lines marked in green ink, and an elven seal pressed in wax of dark emerald.

When it arrived in Goldan, Mugumar unrolled the map and stared at the border. “Millow Point,” he muttered. “So be it.”

He called his captains, marked the map in stone, and declared, “The border is set. For now, we will not cross. And neither will they. Let the mountain and forest breathe.”

And so a fragile peace took hold, stitched together by parchment and war-weariness. Patrols were pulled back. Watchfires dimmed. The forest no longer rang with the clash of metal but with the quiet sounds of wind and birdsong.

Down in the valleys, the party of Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil found themselves with freer days. They spent their time more often near the border fires, in the same familiar clearing where once battle had seemed only a breath away.

One evening, they sat with their old elven friends, Linthal and two others, the fire crackling gently between them. Ale passed hands in clay jugs, and smoked meat sizzled on flat stones beside the flames.

Fimly, beard matted with grease and pipe ash, raised his mug. “Mfff… to the quiet times.”

“What did he say?” asked Linthal, smiling.

Gurin translated, chuckling, “He said: to the quiet times.”

They all drank.

Mordil leaned back against a log, arms crossed behind his head. “We’ve not lifted a blade in weeks. Feels odd, but good. I might even miss the weight of the hammer.”

“I might not,” said Gurin. “Fewer funerals is worth a lighter belt.”

Linthal poked at the fire. “This peace… may not last forever. But even a short season of peace is worth holding.”

Mordil nodded slowly. “It all comes down to who’s willing to talk, and who’s only willing to take. If the new kings remember the price we’ve all paid, maybe there’s hope.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Gurin said, raising his mug again.

Fimly tossed a cooked root into the fire, half of it sticking to his beard. “Mrmphh...no more war. Not yet.”

They all laughed, the sound echoing lightly through the trees.

And for that night, beneath the watchful stars, the fire burned in peace, warming dwarves and elves alike.

In the months that followed the signing of the border at Millow Point, something long-buried beneath blood and soil began to stir between the kingdoms of Goldan and Eldirin—cooperation. Where once patrols had clashed with steel, now caravans rolled and riverboats drifted. Trade, tentative at first, now flourished like spring from the ashes of war.

From the deep bellies of the Mistshroud Peaks, dwarves hauled iron in heavy carts, their axes now swinging not for war, but to mine the earth's bounty. Long mule trains creaked down winding paths to the riverbanks, where elven traders waited with flat-bottomed boats crafted of cedar and silverwood. Iron ingots were stacked with care, measured and weighed with precision.

"Eight crates of fine-forged mountain iron," grunted a dwarf, handing a parchment to the elven scribe on the dock.

"And in return," replied the elf, ticking notes with a quill, "twelve crates of wheat from the southern groves. Golden, full, and already milled."

Further upriver, silver was being mined now from a vein newly struck—clean, pure, and bright. The dwarves brought it wrapped in cloth and sealed in chests, trading it for the delicacies of elven life—refined furniture carved with leaf-patterns, silk robes dyed in forest hues, finely crafted bows and tools of unmatched grace.

On the river, boats drifted calmly. Elves poled and guided them with long staves, eyes ever watchful of the current. Dwarven goods stacked neatly beside crates of barley, jars of honeyed fruit, and coiled ropes. The river, once red with blood, now bore barrels and trade seals.

At the Eldirin docks, the boats were met with cheers. Workers unloaded goods, setting them onto wagons pulled by sleek deer or light-footed ponies. Markets flourished, and smiths took the iron and silver into their shops where the clink of hammer on anvil sang once more—this time to build, not destroy.

One morning, Elrond sat in his study atop the high chambers of Eldirin, a vaulted room woven from vine and stone, the light spilling through stained glass leaves in hues of green and gold. Maps were spread across his table. A scroll of trade figures lay open, detailing the growing exchange between their two cities.

A soft knock broke the silence.

"My king," said the steward, entering. "The last silver trade from Goldan has arrived. The docks say they brought an extra chest, unasked."

Elrond nodded without looking up. "Let it be recorded and returned with thanks."

When the steward left, Elrond rose and paced the room, hands behind his back. His gaze drifted from the charts to the sword hanging above the hearth—his father's blade. The handle worn smooth. The blood of war long cleaned from its edge.

He paused, staring at it.

"They trade freely now," he murmured to himself. "Laughing over goods, passing jugs of ale as if their axes didn't bite into our kin."

His jaw tightened.

"But the people… they need this peace."

He returned to his seat, fingers tracing the rivers drawn on the map.

"For the kingdom," he whispered. "For now."

He looked up again, eyes hardening.

"But the day will come. Dwarves do not forget, and neither do I."

And so he sat, caught between silence and memory, while outside his chamber the world moved on—carts rolled, coins clinked, and the river bore its weight with quiet grace.

Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil had never walked so quietly, not because they had to, but because the streets of Eldirin demanded it. The tall arched branches that formed living halls overhead, the faint glow of ever-burning flower lanterns, and the polished wood and stone walkways all seemed to ask for reverence. Even Fimly, beard bristling and armored shoulders brushing past elegant vine-laced columns, kept his boots a bit lighter on the steps.

They entered Emberlight, an elven tavern wrapped around a great tree whose hollowed core formed the hearth. Soft music floated in the air, and delicate green-tinted glass chandeliers spun slowly with the breeze. They found a table near a curved window overlooking a garden and settled into the finely-carved chairs with a grunt.

A tall elven barkeep approached. "Welcome, friends from Goldan. What may the leaves offer you?"

Fimly muttered something beneath his enormous beard, only the words "meat" and "mfff" audible. Gurin chuckled. "Food and ale, friend. Let's see what your kind brews."

The plates came out swiftly—silken deer meat so tender it barely needed chewing, paired with a spiral of strange vegetables, purple and green, sweet and sharp all at once. The dwarves devoured the meal with approving grunts.

"This…" Mordil said between bites, "might just be the best thing I've ever tasted outside the mountain."

"Agreed," Gurin said, licking his fingers. "Don't ask me what half of this is, but I'd eat it again."

Then came the ale. Pale gold and clear as springwater.

Fimly took one long swig, wiped his foam-dotted mustache, and growled something deep in his beard. No one caught a word, but the tone was unmistakably displeased.

Gurin had just finished his fifth mug. “I’ve drunk pond water stronger than this,” he said, slapping the table. “Elves need a lesson in brewing!”

Mordil laughed. “This isn’t ale—it’s forest juice.”

Just then, an elven barmaid with silver hair and a smile of amusement approached their table. “We anticipated such sentiments. For our dwarven guests, we keep something… special.”

She set down three black clay mugs, steam barely rising from within. The dwarves leaned in, noses twitching.

Fimly sniffed it, muttered a questioning “Mrrhmph?” and took a swig. His eyes widened.

Mordil raised his mug high. “Now *that’s* the spirit!”

They drank heartily, the air filling with the scent of roasted barley and stone-deep fermentation.

After their meal, the party wandered through Eldirin, admiring its strange, airy beauty. Slender bridges spanned ponds filled with silverfish, and buildings climbed trees like ivy. At a renowned armosmith’s shop nestled in a curved oak trunk, Gurin found a pair of silver-inlaid gauntlets.

“They’re light,” he said, clenching his fists. “And strong.”

Mordil tried on a pair of soft, dark leather boots that fit like a second skin. “I’ll take these,” he grinned. “Feel like I’m walking on moss.”

Later, in the marketplace, two elven women stood behind a stall of vegetables, offering shimmering red bulbs and star-shaped roots. But rather than push produce, they struck up conversation.

“You’re from Goldan?” asked one, her hair the color of autumn leaves.

“We are,” said Gurin, smiling. “Fimly, Mordil, and me. And you are?”

“Thalwen,” said the first. “And this is Aerin. We’ve always wanted to see the great halls of the dwarves.”

“Well then,” said Mordil, offering a hand, “you’ve just earned yourselves a guided tour.”

By the next morning, the party and the two elven women were trudging through the winding mountain paths, the mules laden with goods. When they entered Goldan, the contrast was striking. Towering stone arches, fire-lit chambers, statues of ancestors carved from the rock itself—Thalwen and Aerin looked about with wide eyes.

“This is… grand,” Thalwen breathed. “It feels like the mountain itself is alive.”

“Wait till you taste the ale,” Gurin said, leading them into Ember Beard.

They sat at a broad table near the hearth, tankards clinking. Fimly poured dark ale into two mugs and passed them to the elven women.

Thalwen took a sip and coughed. “By the stars…”

Aerin blinked hard. “It tastes like it was brewed with fire!”

“Proper ale,” Mordil grinned.

The two women giggled, cheeks reddening quickly. Thalwen leaned heavily on Gurin’s arm while Aerin squinted at the ceiling, as if it had begun to shift.

“They’re gone,” Mordil laughed. “One mug!”

Fimly chortled deeply, beard shaking. “Mfffhah… now *that’s* dwarven hospitality.”

And around them, laughter echoed off the stone walls—dwarves and elves together, if only for a time, forgetting blood and borders in favor of drink, food, and stories shared by the fire.

A day on patrol

In the dappled gloom of the ancient woods, an elven patrol stumbled upon a grisly sight. Seven of their brethren lay scattered across a fern-strewn clearing, their bodies mutilated—limbs severed, torsos gashed, faces barely recognizable. Arrows jutted from bark and bone alike. The forest, once silent with songbirds, now echoed only with horror.

The patrol leader, Elirand, knelt beside a fallen comrade and clenched his jaw. “Report to the captain. Now.”

They moved quickly, shadows among the trees, and within the hour stood before their commander. “Seven dead,” Elirand said through gritted teeth. “It was no simple ambush. Whoever did this… meant to send a message.”

The commander wasted no time. He ascended the spiral staircase of Eldirin’s inner palace, and entered Elrond’s study with urgency.

Elrond looked up from his maps, brow darkened already from troubled thought.

“Speak.”

The commander bowed. “Seven of our patrol, my lord. Found dismembered. No survivors. No signs of dwarves, but…” He hesitated.

Elrond’s jaw tightened. “But you suspect them.”

“There were signs of heavy boots. Not elven.”

Elrond stood slowly, fury rising behind his composed facade. “Those damn dwarves. So thin is the peace possible with them. We *just* signed it, and already they send killers in the dark.”

Before the commander could respond, another burst into the room, out of breath and wide-eyed.

“My lord—scouts spotted a group of orcs! Armored, disciplined. Not the usual rabble. We lost three men fighting them. They did not look like bandits.”

Elrond’s eyes narrowed, the storm behind them tempered now with doubt.

“Then perhaps…” he murmured, pacing. “Perhaps the attack was orcish. It would explain the brutality. Yet… I cannot be sure.”

He turned to both commanders. “Send out more patrols. I want every shadow in these woods turned over.”

Far from the palace, deeper in the forest, Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil strode on their patrol route. The leaves were quiet today, the wind carrying only a faint warning.

“Too quiet,” Mordil muttered, his grip tightening on his warhammer.

Then came the sounds—harsh, guttural grunts, and strange clicking noises. The party dropped low, creeping into a thicket. Through the brush, they saw them: six orcs, crouched around a crude sketch drawn in the dirt—symbols, circles, and what looked like a battle formation.

The orcs wore dark iron armor, mismatched but durable, and bore scars from old wars. Not ragged bandits—these were warriors.

Gurin stepped forward, not bothering to mask his presence. “Oi! What are you dung-born beasts doing on dwarven soil?”

The largest of the orcs, a brute with a jagged axe strapped to his back and fangs protruding over his lips, looked up and grinned.

“This is *orc* land now,” he growled, rising to his full height. “Tell your bearded mountain worms the forest belongs to us. And soon… the stone halls too.”

Then he spit at Gurin’s boots.

Fimly was already drawing his axe. Mordil surged forward, swinging his warhammer with a grunt.

The clearing exploded into violence.

The orc chief charged, slamming his shield into Gurin, who staggered but held his ground, swinging a gauntleted fist into the brute’s jaw. Mordil clashed with two orcs at once, spinning

and smashing one to the ground with a bone-shattering crack. Fimly roared—a muffled, thunderous cry—and buried his axe in the shoulder of an orc, ripping it free as black blood sprayed across the ferns.

“Back to your filth holes!” Mordil shouted, smashing an orc’s leg in two.

One orc lunged at Fimly, blade raised, but Gurin caught it with his shield and drove his axe up under the creature’s ribs. The orc gasped, stumbled, and fell with a hiss.

The chief was fast—he slammed into Mordil with a brutal elbow, knocking him into a tree—but Mordil recovered with a howl and brought his warhammer down, smashing the chief’s knee. The orc dropped, snarling, and Gurin finished him with a clean, brutal chop to the neck.

When the blood mist cleared, all six orcs lay dead in the underbrush. The party stood panting, their armor nicked, their weapons slick.

Fimly looked down at the markings in the dirt. “Mrrf… no bandits do this.”

Mordil nodded. “They’re planning something. This wasn’t random.”

Gurin wiped blood from his brow. “We’ve got trouble, lads. Real trouble.”

And as they left the clearing, silent now but for the wind, they knew the forest had new shadows lurking within it—and peace, once again, was only borrowed time.

In the shadow of the Black Crags, where sun seldom reached and the winds howled through broken stones like distant screams, the Tower of Guldhad rose like a fang of black glass. Within its uppermost chamber, lit by green fire from braziers set in dragon-shaped sconces, the Black Wizard stood before a wide stone table. Upon it, a map of the elven lands was spread, marked in red chalk and scorched symbols.

Around him stood the orcish war-chieftains—hulking, scarred, clad in jagged armor pieced together from bones and dark iron. Their breath stank of blood and smoke, and their eyes gleamed with the promise of destruction.

"This," said the Black Wizard, his voice a serpent's whisper, "is Eldirin. Their proud trees rise like banners of arrogance. Their king is young. Wounded. Proud. He will not expect what comes next."

One of the chieftains—a brute with a skull-pierced jaw and a whip coiled at his side—snorted. “Hrrakh! We burn their trees. We take their silver towers. Make fire in their roots.”

“Good,” hissed the wizard, his pale fingers trailing over the map. “Each legion marches under its own banner. Ironmaw takes the southern approach. Grashok circles east. Rulfgar, your war-riders sweep through the meadows. When you see the river Lyavarel—choke it red.”

The orcs screeched in approval, their guttural tongues rising in a chorus of savage pride.

“Urgh-lak targhûm! Nakh-thâz grothk!” barked one. “Thok-ma-rah!”

Others slapped weapons against their chests and pounded their fists on the table. The air thickened with the stench of sweat, oil, and bloodlust.

Beneath the tower, the orcish city of Urrg-Dul stirred like a nest of hornets. Dug into the bowels of the hills, it sprawled in a maze of tunnels and halls lit by fires that never died. Ore-smelters glowed crimson with molten iron, their fumes curling through black chimneys. Orcs barked and bellowed at each other in their native tongue, dragging chains of raw ore and feeding the forges with trees felled by the dozen.

“Hrak zul! More wood!” one overseer roared, slapping a goblin with a glowing poker. “The smelters must not cool!”

Rows of armor were lined along stone corridors, beaten into shape by hammer and anvil. Swords were forged long and jagged, shields rimmed with teeth, spears tipped with obsidian.

The Black Wizard stood above it all, high in his tower, a silhouette against the lurid firelight. He turned now from the war table to a pedestal where an ancient tome rested, bound in leather that shifted like skin. He opened it slowly, the pages crackling like bone-dry leaves.

His lips began to move, and the room chilled.

“Senn-thúl Varagûn… morthêl rûna khanûl… Azzhar-zûn, lend me shadow.”

From the pages, black mist began to rise, curling into the shape of a twisted wraith with burning violet eyes.

The wizard leaned close. “The elves will cry out for their forest gods. Let them. You… will answer them instead.”

The shadow hissed and vanished into the wind.

The drums began at dusk.

In rows stretching over the meadows and low hills, the first orcish legions began to march. Footsoldiers clad in iron scale, shields strapped to their backs, axes and swords gleaming. Banners of black and blood-red snapped in the wind. Their commanders—hulking monsters with names that made trees wither—rode monstrous beasts that snarled and pawed at the ground.

“Thrak! Move!” shouted a chieftain, driving his spear into the air. “To Eldirin! To ash!”

And so the land began to tremble—not with storms, but with the march of thousands of iron boots and a darkness that had long been gathering in the corners of forgotten places.

For weeks, the sky over the western hills remained clouded with soot and dust as the vast orcish host crawled across the land like a black tide. Ten thousand strong, they moved with the force of a storm—marching in brutal rhythm, their chants and roars echoing through valleys, unsettling flocks and shaking the branches of ancient trees.

The orcs hauled siege engines of terrifying design—iron-banded battering rams shaped like wolves' jaws, bone-covered towers mounted on wheels as tall as houses, and great catapults carved with skull glyphs. Dozens of slaves and goblins pushed and pulled these machines while whips cracked overhead. Massive beasts, part boar, part lizard, were yoked to the largest wagons, snarling and foaming as they dragged the war machines toward the heart of the elven realm.

Scout bands moved ahead of the host, small groups of snarling raiders spreading out like sickness. They fell upon lonely farmsteads and sleepy forest villages, cutting down all they found. The trees burned black, and the humble thatch-roofed homes were set alight in howling laughter. Innocent cries echoed with the crackling of fire and the guttural cheers of victory.

Smoke coiled into the sky—thick and sudden.

From a high ridge not far from the charred ruins of a village, a lone elven scout crouched beneath the low-hanging boughs of a pine. His name was Thalin, and he had seen the shapes in the smoke—hulking, horned silhouettes dragging corpses, setting fire to granaries.

His eyes widened. “By the Grove…”

He turned and sprinted back through the woods, dodging roots and rocks, bounding across shallow brooks until his breath came ragged and his heart pounded like a drum. The trees opened to reveal a grove where the elven commanders had camped, war banners fluttering and horses resting under the shade.

He burst into the meeting circle. “Orcs! The village at Felhollow—they’ve struck it. Dozens of them, raiding parties. The fires are rising.”

The commander of the eastern watch, Vaelor, stood tall and grim. “Sound the horns. We march.”

Within the hour, swift-footed warriors of Eldirin were running through the woods, clad in light armor of greensteel and barkmail, bows slung over their shoulders, swords at their hips. They moved like wind through the branches.

They arrived at Felhollow to horror.

The village smoldered, bodies scattered amid burning timber. The raiders were still there—snarling, picking through the dead. But they did not pick long. Arrows sang through the smoke, striking orcs through eye and throat. Elven swords flashed like riverlight, and the fight erupted in a whirl of chaos and screams.

“Hold the west flank!” shouted one elf, leaping over a fallen cart to drive his blade into an orc’s neck.

“Push them back!” cried another, releasing a volley into a charging brute.

The clash was fierce. Orcs snarled and fought with wild strength, but the elves struck with elegance and precision. For every orc felled, an elf fell too—pierced by crude blades or smashed beneath war clubs. Blood soaked the charred earth.

When the last of the orcs were cut down, a dozen elves stood—bruised, bloodied, and breathing hard.

“We… we held it,” said one, his hands shaking as he lowered his bow.

Then the ground began to rumble.

The air grew heavy with a low, throbbing sound—like drums muffled by distance. The surviving elves turned toward the west, eyes narrowing.

From beyond the tree line, dark shapes appeared. Hundreds at first. Then thousands. The horizon shifted like a storm made of iron and leather, teeth and fire. Siege towers loomed behind the marching legions, war banners waving with symbols of death.

One elf’s legs buckled. “No… no, that can’t be…”

He stumbled backward, dropped his sword, and a dark stain spread down his leggings.

“They’re coming!” screamed another.

“Run!” barked Vaelor. “Back to the city! Warn the king!”

The handful of survivors turned and fled across the meadows, boots splashing through wet grass, hearts pounding. Behind them, the orcish host roared in unison—a howl that shattered the wind.

Above it all, the creak and groan of war machines moving echoed across the land like the grinding of the world's bones.

Across the rolling meadows that had once rippled with golden barley and laughter of traders, now came the sound of doom.

The orcs marched in the rhythm of a death chant, a deep, guttural song rising from ten thousand throats like the growl of the earth itself. Their boots stomped in unison, a thunderous cadence that made the very trees tremble. Black flags fluttered, spears glinted, and their heavy voices rumbled in an ancient orcish war hymn—throaty and slow, like stone grinding against stone.

"Gûrh-dûl, thrak morûm, ghaz-nar agh ûsh..."
(*Blood to the ground, fire to the sky, death and darkness to our enemies...*)

From behind the ranks came the mournful call of deep war horns—bass trumpets carved from dragon bone, blown by war-priests with crimson warpaint. The low notes boomed over the hills, vibrating in the bones of even the most seasoned warriors.

In Eldirin, the peace shattered with the breathless arrival of the elven patrol. Covered in soot and blood, their faces pale, they burst into the command hall.

"My lord!" cried one, falling to his knees. "The orcs! Ten thousand strong—trolls… siege weapons… they are here!"

Elrond stood from his war table, his voice hoarse but resolute. "Sound the bells. Close the gates. Wake every sword in the city."

The city exploded into action. Panic flickered in every face—women running to gather children, elders led to the inner sanctums. Across the city, horns blared, and drums of warning were struck. Commanders barked out orders in sharp tones.

"To arms! To arms!"
"Distribute bows—every archer to the wall!"
"Boil the tar! Brace the eastern gate!"

Young soldiers, barely grown, were shoved into ranks and handed swords with shaking hands. Armor was strapped over trembling bodies. On the walls, archers lined up, their green-fletched arrows nocked and drawn, eyes wide as the smoke on the horizon thickened.

Massive cauldrons filled with tar bubbled over forge-fires. The smell was thick and bitter. The gates of Eldirin groaned as they closed, locking the last of the citizenry inside. A prayer rose from the city's heart—quiet and full of dread.

Then, from the trees and hills, the orcs came into sight—waves of dark bodies in iron and bone, a flood of war.

Two mountain trolls led the vanguard, skin like cracked granite, carrying a monstrous battering ram shaped like a boar's tusk. They walked with their legs thumping ground towards the gates. In short time they started smashing the gate in. With every thud against the gate, the wood cracked and shuddered.

Elrond stood on the battlements, his green cloak whipping in the wind, sword drawn. He raised his arm.

"Loose!"

The first volley of elven arrows sang into the sky—sharp, whistling death. Many orcs fell, some pierced clean through the skull or chest, their bodies toppling into the grass.

But more came.

From behind crude barricades, orcish archers returned fire—short, jagged arrows raining upon the elven walls. Cries rang out as elf after elf was struck, some tumbling from the battlements to the stones below.

The trolls bashed the gates again.

"Hold the tar!" shouted a commander beside Elrond. "Not yet!"

The war machines creaked into place. Catapults built from blackened wood hurled boulders as large as oxen. One stone struck the corner of the wall, shattering the carved edge and sending a mass of rock and elven archers plummeting.

"Get those supports in place!" another captain shouted, rallying his men.

Below, hundreds of orcs rushed the walls with long ladders. They slammed them against the stone and began climbing, roaring curses as they scaled.

"Now! Pour it!" Elrond commanded.

With a groan of effort, elven defenders upended the first cauldron. A cascade of burning tar flowed down, igniting the ladder and the orcs on it. Screams rose, high and shrieking, as orcish bodies writhed in flames.

Still, they kept coming.

The gates thundered under the repeated impact of the trolls. Archers fired. Tar boiled. Stones shattered. The city of Eldirin shook on the brink. More elves readied themselves for a fight, standing now thirteen thousand strong.

Elrond stood firm, though a tremor fought at the edge of his voice. "We hold. No matter what beast claws at our gates. We *hold*."

And as night fell and the siege howled on, Eldirin lit its fires against the storm.

The battle for Eldirin raged with unrelenting fury as orcs surged over the walls, their guttural war cries mingling with the clash of steel and the screams of the wounded. Elven defenders fought valiantly, their blades flashing in the dim light, but the sheer number of attackers threatened to overwhelm them.

On the northern battlements, a group of orcs managed to breach the defenses, leaping onto the walls with savage intensity. Elven archers turned their bows upon them, releasing volleys of arrows at close range. One elf, his quiver empty, drew his dagger and engaged an orc in a desperate melee, parrying a crude axe before driving the blade into the creature's throat.

At the main gate, the trolls continued their relentless assault, each blow from the battering ram causing the massive doors to shudder. The hinges groaned under the strain, and cracks began to appear in the reinforced wood. Elven soldiers stood ready behind the gates, spears poised, their faces set with grim determination.

On the eastern wall, Elrond himself fought alongside his warriors. Two orcs had scaled the battlements, and he met them with sword in hand. The first orc lunged, and Elrond sidestepped, delivering a swift cut that felled the creature. The second orc swung a rusted sword, catching Elrond across the face. Blood streamed down his cheek, staining his tunic, but he pressed on, his blade finding its mark.

Throughout the battlements, similar scenes unfolded. Elven warriors engaged in fierce combat, defending their home with every ounce of strength. The air was thick with smoke and the scent of blood, the sounds of battle echoing through the walls.

Despite the chaos, the elves held their ground, their unity and resolve shining through the darkness. The fate of Eldirin hung in the balance, but its defenders fought on, determined to protect their city from the invading horde.

Deep within the fortified halls of Goldan, the torches burned low, casting long, wavering shadows along the stone corridors. Most of the dwarven keep lay in silence, the hour far past midnight. Only the occasional clang of a guard's boots echoed in the distance, oblivious to the shadow slipping past behind them.

The assassin moved like a wraith, cloaked in a patchwork of gray and black. He hugged the walls, stepped over loose stones, and breathed only when needed. No sound escaped him. His eyes gleamed with the promise of coin—or vengeance. His goal lay just ahead: the royal chambers.

Inside, King Mugumar IV lay half-asleep, beard splayed across his chest, a half-empty goblet of wine resting beside him on a carved nightstand. The warmth of the fire in the hearth cast a soft glow on the stonework walls. Beside him, Queen Dara slept soundly, a hand resting near his arm.

The door creaked open, just enough.

The assassin slithered in, silent, crawling low like a hunting beast. His fingers tightened around the handle of a curved dagger. The moment drew near. His eyes fixed on the king's broad chest rising and falling beneath the thick wool blanket.

Then he rose.

The flash of silver glinted as he lunged toward the bed, but Mugumar's eyes snapped open like iron shutters. The king rolled to the side just in time, grabbing the assassin's wrist. Steel met flesh, and the sound of a grunt broke the silence.

Dara screamed, scrambling backward off the bed.

Mugumar growled, "You picked the wrong dwarf's sleep to disturb, you rat-eared dung !"

He slammed his fist into the assassin's face with a sickening crunch, the nose breaking instantly, blood spurting across the bedding. The assassin writhed, trying to wrest the dagger free, but Mugumar's hands were like iron clamps. They tumbled to the floor, crashing into the wooden frame with a thunderous thud.

The wrestle turned brutal. Mugumar threw the intruder down and straddled him, punching again and again. The assassin clawed at him, teeth bared, blood flying with every strike.

Dara, eyes wide with horror, had already fled for the guards.

"Thought you'd sneak up on me?" Mugumar roared. "I eat bigger threats than you with my breakfast pork!"

A final blow landed with a deep, wet *crack*. The assassin's body went limp. The dagger slipped from his blood-slick hand. His skull was caved in, his jaw slack. Mugumar, panting and bloodied, stared down at the twitching corpse beneath him.

The door burst open.

Guards flooded into the room, weapons drawn, eyes wide at the carnage.

Too late.

Mugumar, still seated atop the corpse, turned his head slowly. Blood dripped from his fists and down his forearms.

"Too late, friends," he muttered with a half-smile. "You missed the party. I already took care of our friend here… he insisted on special treatment."

The guards looked at one another, shame on their faces. They moved quickly, gathering the body and hauling it away, none daring to meet their king's eyes.

Dara returned, shaken but unharmed, and stood quietly beside the door, her face pale.

Mugumar groaned as he stood, grabbing the edge of the table to steady himself. He poured another goblet of wine, thick and red, and downed it in a single long swallow.

He set the cup down hard and stared into the fire.

“Elrond,” he muttered under his breath. “Only a snake with a grudge would send a blade in the night.”

He stood in silence, the blood on his fists cooling, and the flames casting long shadows that danced across the room like whispers of vengeance yet to come.

With a deafening thunder, the gates of Eldirin splintered apart beneath the relentless blows of the trolls’ ram. The final hinge snapped, a tortured groan echoed through the square, and then the massive iron-bound doors burst inward with an earth-shaking crash.

From the smoke-filled gap, the orc horde poured in like a black tide unleashed. War-cries shattered the air. Their boots pounded on marble streets as they surged into the city. Behind them came the siege trolls, howling and bellowing in their guttural tongue, swinging their iron clubs into the nearest buildings and trampling anything that moved beneath their thick, mottled feet.

Within moments, the elegant beauty of Eldirin turned to chaos.

Blood ran down the cobbled paths like rainwater in a storm. The scent of burning wood and charred flesh filled the air. People screamed, cried for their families, for gods, for help—pleas lost in the brutal din of steel against steel. Arrows rained down from surviving towers, but the orcs came on undeterred, shielded by rage and numbers.

Elven battalions clashed with the invaders in the wide plazas and narrow alleyways. The green and silver of their armor flashed like dying stars, elegant swords whirling in graceful arcs—cutting deep, fast, precise. But the orcs, thicker in muscle and madness, overwhelmed them by sheer brutality. Blade met axe, spear met jagged mace, and bodies fell in heaps.

On the great Riverwalk of Eldirin, Captain Aelron of the city guard rallied his troops. “Hold the line! Hold the river! Do not let them split us!”

A wave of orcs crashed into his flank. He raised his blade, parried a strike, then spun and drove it through the gut of a berserker. He barely turned in time to deflect the blow of another before a hammer caught his shoulder, sending him crashing into a fruit stall. He rose bleeding, dazed, and roared to his men again, “Hold the godsdamned line!”

Meanwhile, far from the carnage, in the twilight of the western forest, the party—Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil—stood frozen as the sound rolled like thunder across the hills.

Fimly, eyes wide beneath his thick brows, whispered, “That ain’t the wind... mfff... listen.”

A chorus of roars echoed through the trees. Steel clattered. The very ground trembled.

Gurin took two quick steps to a rise in the hill and peered through the branches. “By the ancestors… it’s an army. Orcs. Thousands of ‘em.”

“They’re headed for Eldirin,” Mordil muttered, already turning.

Without a word more, the three dwarves turned and ran, armor clanking as they pounded the forest trails. Branches whipped their faces, breath burning in their lungs.

By nightfall, they stumbled into the barracks of Goldan, sweat pouring, mud up to their knees.

“Commander!” Fimly bellowed, barely catching his breath. “Orcs… Eldirin… under siege!”

The dwarven commander dropped his quill. “What?”

“Thousands,” Mordil added. “The whole dark-blooded host.”

The commander cursed and turned on his heel, rushing to the keep.

In the stone halls of the mountain, King Mugumar stood before his hearth when the news arrived.

“By the bloody nine hells,” Mugumar growled, gripping the arm of his throne. “What in all the deep earth’s name… why would those maggots of the dark march to our doorstep and bleed the elves out?”

The commander saluted sharply. “Shall we ready the legions, sire?”

Mugumar stroked his black beard, eyes narrowing. “Not yet. Elrond sent that assassin. I’ve no love for him. But orcs…” he spat into the fire, “Orcs are a worse rot.”

He turned. “Send scouts. I want eyes on every inch of that field. If Eldirin falls, the orcs will turn their eyes to our gates next.”

Back in Eldirin, the city choked in smoke and despair.

Trolls rampaged through the Temple Quarter, smashing statues of the gods and crushing elven priests underfoot. Children fled screaming. Flames crawled across rooftops. An elven warrior ducked beneath a troll’s club and drove a spear through its knee, bringing the beast to one leg, before being seized and hurled into a wall like a rag doll.

Elrond fought near the high terraces, his face bandaged where the rusty blade had slashed him earlier. His sword was dark with blood. “Stand with me!” he cried. “Let the trees weep if they must, but do not yield!”

But even with thirteen thousand defenders, the elves faltered under the storm.

And the orcs, chanting in rhythm, pressed on, breaking the city that had stood for a thousand years, now echoing with the howls of a war none had truly prepared for.

The fires of Eldirin raged through the night sky, an angry crown of smoke and flame above the once serene elven capital. Of the orcish horde, six thousand still roared and raged through the shattered streets, and only two thousand elven warriors remained, weary, bloodied, many barely standing. Their blades trembled from exhaustion, and their arrows grew scarce. Elven

corpses lay among the burning gardens and shattered fountains, while orcs pressed on like a flood of filth and steel.

Meanwhile, far to the north, in the deepstone halls of Goldan, dwarven scouts arrived before the great stone throne of King Mugumar, armor crusted with the dust of the journey, eyes grim.

“Sire,” one scout panted, kneeling. “Eldirin bleeds. Six thousand orcs remain, and the elves have but two thousand left. Come dawn, the city will fall.”

Mugumar leaned forward on his throne, one thick fist resting on the pommel of his war-axe. His eyes narrowed.

“Let it,” he muttered at first. “Let the long-ears see the cost of betrayal. They send assassins into my own bedchamber, and expect peace to hold? Elrond’s dagger spoke louder than any treaty.”

He rose from his throne, pacing before the fire. The hall was silent except for the soft crackle of flame.

“But…” Mugumar’s voice grew lower. “There’s more than just Elrond in Eldirin. There’s bakers and smiths, children and mothers, traders who came to Goldan with peace in their pockets.”

He poured a goblet of wine and drank deep, eyes staring into the dark red liquid as if it held the answer.

“Aye,” he grunted at last. “Let the elven prince burn—but not his people. Not all of ‘em.”

He turned sharply to his commanders. His voice thundered.

“All right, ye maggots! Enough brooding and belly-scratching! Gather the army—ten thousand strong. Ready every blade, every boot, every breath! Tonight, we march for battle!”

The stone hall erupted in a chorus of cheers.

“Yes, my king!” shouted Commander Bromdrik, saluting. “We will not let the orcs feast!”

Steel rang out as hammers struck anvils and racks of armor were thrown open. The barracks became a whirlwind of movement—troops pulling on chainmail, fastening helms, sliding axes into belts, buckling shields. Fires blazed hotter as smiths finished last-minute repairs to armor and weapons. The war horns blew, deep and defiant, echoing off the cavern walls like a call to the gods of stone and fire.

Outside, on the flat cliffs below Mistshroud Peaks, the dwarven host assembled.

Ten thousand warriors strong, banners fluttering in the cold mountain wind, the army stood in rank and file. Torchlight gleamed on their helms and glinted off the runes etched into their

axes and shields. They stood shoulder to shoulder, singing a war song that rumbled like thunder:

“From stone we rise, with iron hands,
To crush the dark that taints the lands.
For kin and hearth, we fight and stand,
By axe and oath, by king’s command!”

Bannermen marched at the front, carrying the gold-on-black sigil of Goldan—the hammer crossed with mountain peaks. The wind carried the deep, proud chorus of dwarven voices across the hills.

At the head of the army, King Mugumar mounted the steps of a raised stone outcropping, gripping his axe with both hands.

“Elves or no elves, this is our land!” he roared. “And I’ll not let orc filth crawl across it unchecked! March! For Goldan! For honor!”

And with the sound of boots striking rock, the dwarven legions began their march south, the earth trembling beneath their feet, their songs rising into the night like drums of doom and deliverance. Eldirin would not fall without a second storm arriving at its gates.

Beneath a blackened sky and the glow of a burning Eldirin, the dwarven army descended like a storm of stone and iron. The ground trembled with their step, the rhythm of ten thousand boots pounding the earth in perfect unison. In long, unwavering rows they came—each dwarf a wall of muscle and iron, their beards braided in runes of war, eyes hard with resolve.

Axes gleamed beneath the moonlight. War hammers swung against the air like pendulums of death. Shields the size of doors formed a wall of steel at the front, the dwarves moving as one, unstoppable.

Orcs, many still scattered in loose bands outside the city walls, were caught off guard. From the smoke and chaos of Eldirin, the orcish captains bellowed and barked orders. The war drums pounded anew as the orc forces rallied, forming a crude, snarling line. Hundreds charged forward, blades raised, voices howling like wolves let loose.

The clash came like a thunderclap.

The dwarves held the line as orcs slammed into them—black flesh against plated steel. Axes met cleavers. Hammers crashed into tusked jaws. Shields shuddered under the force of brute strength. The air became a mist of blood, sweat, and breathless fury.

In the front, a dwarf named Hadrok swung his hammer in a wide arc, catching an orc in the chest and sending him reeling. Another lunged at him with a spiked blade, but Hadrok ducked low and brought his hammer upward, shattering the orc’s jaw with a sickening crunch.

To his left, two dwarves fought back-to-back. One caught a blade on his shield, while the other slid his axe into an orc's ribs, twisting it before ripping it free. An orc berserker charged them both, howling—he took one clean swing at the shielded dwarf, sending him to the ground, then turned—but the second dwarf leapt onto the orc's back, drove a dagger deep into his neck, and held on as the beast thrashed and choked.

Further down the field, a group of twenty dwarves formed a wedge, shields raised, axes protruding. They drove into a dense orc group like a hammerhead through cloth. The sound of metal on flesh rang like a forge at war—bones broke, blades screeched across armor, and war cries rose louder than the storm.

Orcs responded with their own fury. A massive orc captain wielding a double-headed axe charged through the field, carving a path with blood. He split one dwarf in half, then crushed another with his boot—but before he could swing again, three dwarves piled onto him, dragging him to the ground. The fight turned into a savage pile of blades and screams until the orc's roar fell silent.

Mugumar himself was in the thick of it.

With his great axe "Stonebite" in hand, he fought like a mountain come alive. His armor bore fresh blood and old dents, his beard braided with silver. He drove his axe through one orc's skull and turned to decapitate another in the same motion. One by one, orcs fell beneath him, until the space around him was littered with corpses and broken spears.

"Push forward!" Mugumar bellowed. "Let them choke on the rock they awoke!"

The dwarven advance pressed the orcs backward toward Eldirin's gates. The very field shook with the thunder of battle. Smoke and ash twisted in the air, mixing with the cries of the dying and the clash of steel.

And through it all, the dwarves did not break. They had come not just to fight, but to crush — one heaving breath, one bloodied step at a time.

The streets of Eldirin, once flowing with quiet waters and shaded by whispering leaves, now ran with blood. The dwarves, having crushed the scattered orc battalions outside the gates, surged into the city through the shattered entrance like a flood of stone and fury. Their war cries echoed against the high marble walls, bouncing through the ruined courtyards and across fallen towers.

Inside, five thousand orcs still remained, fresh with the scent of elven blood on their blades and eager for more. They roared as they charged down the main avenue, filling the space between burning buildings with their sheer mass. Their captain, a horned brute in black armor, bellowed commands as the two armies collided like titans in a stone arena.

Axes met scimitars. War hammers cracked bone. Dwarves fell, but not without dragging an orc or two with them. The narrow streets forced close combat—perfect for dwarves, who

pressed forward with unrelenting force, shoulder to shoulder, shields locked. They carved paths through the orc horde, bodies piling high, the cobbled paths sticky with gore.

From the right flank, the surviving elven warriors—now only a thousand strong—rushed to support. Their arrows struck with deadly precision, picking off orc commanders and archers. Then, with curved swords gleaming and eyes burning with vengeance, they fell upon the orcs from the side.

“Elves to your right!” one dwarven commander cried.

“About time they stopped napping!” shouted a dwarf with a bloodied helm as he cleaved his axe into an orc’s chest.

Elves and dwarves fought side by side, blades weaving between hammer blows. For a moment, it was as if no grudge had ever stood between them—only the raw will to survive.

Amidst the chaos, two siege trolls still roamed the city, crushing everything in their path. One of them roared and flung a shattered cart aside, knocking over a group of elven spearmen. Its foot came down hard, cracking the marble tiles beneath it.

A unit of forty dwarves formed a circle.

“Ropes ready!” barked Captain Thurlin, spinning a length of thick dwarven cord in his gloved hand.

With practiced movements, they cast ropes around the troll’s legs, darting and dodging under swings of its massive arms. Two dwarves were caught mid-run—one flung across the square, the other flattened. But the others held fast, pulling tight. The troll stumbled, knees buckling.

“Now! To the neck!” shouted Thurlin.

Ten dwarves ran up its back like ants on a fallen tree. They plunged their blades into the beast’s neck and throat, hacking through sinew and flesh. The troll bellowed, flailed—then with one last wheeze, crashed to the ground like a felled mountain.

A cheer went up, only to be drowned by the roar of the second troll storming through the library square.

Another group of dwarves, aided by a few nimble elves, employed the same tactic. Ropes around the legs. Arrows to the eyes. Axes and daggers to the throat. The second troll bled dark, steaming blood before toppling through a collapsed archway and dying with a low groan.

The heart of Eldirin became a maelstrom of screams, fire, and the metallic symphony of war. But slowly, the tide turned. The orcs, without their trolls and losing ground to two fronts, began to falter.

A dwarf slammed an orc against a pillar and shouted, “Run, you bastards! Run back to your holes!”

But there would be no retreat. The dwarves and elves pushed with fury, cutting down the last of the orc resistance in the moonlit city streets. The bell tower of Eldirin tolled again—but this time, it tolled for the orcs.

By dawn, the battle had turned. Eldirin still burned, but it stood. And its defenders—dwarf and elf—stood with it.

Elrond lay on the cracked stone road, his once shining armor torn open, dented and caked with blood and ash. His silver-blonde hair was soaked with sweat and dirt, and a long gash cut across his face from temple to jaw, still bleeding in slow rivulets that mixed with the dust and grime of the battle. Around him the city still smoldered, pillars collapsed, flames dancing in broken windows, the air heavy with the scent of burning wood and death.

A cloaked elven commander—Thalanor, one of the last veterans of the royal guard—knelt beside the wounded king. “My lord,” he said gently, lifting Elrond under the arms. “Come. Let me help you.”

Elrond groaned as he was brought to his feet, staggering, barely conscious. His vision swam, but then he saw a figure approaching through the haze—broad-shouldered, dark-bearded, walking like a boulder given legs.

King Mugumar.

Elrond blinked against the blood in his eyes as Mugumar came to a halt before him. Their eyes locked—one filled with pain, the other with suspicion still burning behind them.

“Thank you… my friend,” Elrond said, voice low and cracking. “You… saved the city. Without your dwarves, we would have fallen.”

Mugumar did not smile. His voice was iron.

“I came to help the people,” he said. “They deserve better than to be ruled by a sneaky worm who sends assassins during a time of peace.”

Elrond flinched—not just from pain, but from the words.

“Assassin?” he repeated, stunned. “What are you speaking of?”

“You know damn well what I mean,” Mugumar growled. “One crept into my chambers at night, dagger drawn. Were it not for my own fists, I’d be on a pyre by now.”

Elrond stared at him, his breath coming quick. “I never… I would never do that. What, do you truly think I’d break our treaty with something so base and dishonorable?”

Mugumar’s eyes narrowed. He said nothing.

Elrond pressed on, swaying slightly. “You must believe me. If it wasn’t me, then… then who? The orcs? They came out of nowhere. Without warning. It—it must have been them… It has to be. A ploy. To turn us against each other.”

Mugumar stared in silence, beard twitching slightly, gears turning behind his hard-set eyes. Then he looked down at Elrond's wound, the ragged state of the elven king, and saw no lie in his face. No strength to bluff.

"If it wasn't you…" Mugumar muttered, voice low, "then there's another hand in all this. One that profits from war."

But before Elrond could answer, his knees buckled. His legs gave out from beneath him, and he collapsed, his head hitting the blood-slick stone with a dull crack. His guards rushed forward at once.

"Get him to the healer's hall!" Thalanor shouted. "Make way!"

Elven soldiers and civilians alike stood aside as their king was carried away on a litter of spears and cloaks.

Mugumar watched them go, eyes dark. Then he turned and looked upon the square of Eldirin, now littered with the bodies of both kin and foe.

All around, elves gathered in the dim light of dawn. Some sat in silence, others cried openly. A few still clutched weapons, knuckles white. Commanders barked names, counting the living and marking the fallen. Children were found in alleys. A mother wept as she discovered her son beneath the rubble of a smithy.

And still, no celebration rose.

Only the long, bitter silence of survival.

Mugumar, standing among them, muttered to no one in particular, "If there is a darker hand behind this war… we'd best find it before it strikes again."

And as the sun crept over the broken walls of Eldirin, the light revealed only smoke, shadow, and the cost of a truth yet uncovered.

A hush fell over the square of Eldirin, heavy and unnatural, as if the breath of the city had suddenly been stolen. The sounds of counting and mourning fell to a whisper. Then—without cry or clash—one of Mugumar's guards dropped to the ground, eyes open, breath gone, life extinguished like a snuffed flame.

Mugumar turned swiftly, eyes narrowing. "What in the bloody—"

From the shadows beyond the collapsed market stalls and broken pillars, fifteen figures emerged. Tall, draped in wisps of shadow that curled like smoke from their cloaked forms, their glowing eyes gleamed with a sickly blue hue. Their presence chilled the very air, and the stones beneath them darkened with their steps.

"Black wraiths!" Mugumar bellowed. "Protect yourselves!"

Steel scraped from scabbards as dwarven warriors raised weapons, forming a defensive ring around the king. But it was already too late for many—black claws lashed out, and twenty dwarves fell in seconds, their bodies twitching briefly before lying still, eyes rolled back in their heads.

The dwarves struck back, axes and hammers swinging with desperate force. But their weapons passed through the dark bodies like wind through mist—until a warrior shouted, "Aim for the eyes! Only those cursed with light!"

Blades turned and met resistance—those wraiths with glowing blue eyes shrieked as steel sank into them. One by one, they were torn apart by axe and hammer, their forms dissipating into dark mist with shrill cries that rattled the bones.

But one shadow stood untouched. It had no eyes, no color, no sound to its step. A deeper darkness, it moved slowly, and with each pass through a cluster of warriors, they dropped without a wound, souls snatched away in silence.

Then it turned to Mugumar.

The dwarven king raised his axe, but the shadow did not strike—it reached out. One withered hand touched Mugumar's arm, and the strength drained from him like water from a broken flask. His hand went black, veins crawling with frost, and he dropped to one knee. His chest heaved as a coldness seeped into his skull, and his mind began to dim.

"Ghhh—what is this… rot?" Mugumar growled, his voice trembling.

Then from the rear of the square, a shout came: "Outta the way, you overgrown ghost turds!"

A blast of flame burst across the plaza—bright, roaring like a furnace unleashed. A dwarven battle mage strode into view, arms outstretched as a cone of fire burst from his palms. The fire engulfed the eyeless shadow, wrapping it in lava-hot flame. The creature let out a shriek that tore into the minds of all present before collapsing into ash, its form eaten away by raw, burning light.

Mugumar fell backward, panting, staring at his blackened hand as color slowly began to return. His fingers twitched. The numbness retreated like a tide. His beard was soaked in sweat.

The mage marched over, muttering, "Bloody hellfire, that's some retarded black magic right there. Someone's been conjurin' from beyond the veils, and whoever it is… they know their damn craft."

Mugumar nodded slowly, pushing himself to his feet. "Aye… and it wasn't random. This wasn't no wild ghost raid… This was sent."

The battle-worn dwarves looked around, breathing hard, eyes watching the shadows for more horrors. But the square was still again, save for the stench of death and scorched stone.

Meanwhile, in the upper spire of the tower of Guldhad, the Black Wizard stared into the smoky projection swirling above a shattered glass orb. The vision flickered, showing Mugumar still alive, the wraiths gone. The wizard's black hair clung to his gaunt face as he shrieked and flung his staff across the room, shattering a brazier.

"Fools! Worms! You will not deny me again!"

He clawed at his own scalp, eyes wide with fury. "This is not over… no… not over."

At that very moment, far from the fury, Elrond stirred in his chambers. Bandages wrapped around his face, and a sweet-smelling poultice numbed the pain. Elven women hovered over him, whispering soft prayers and placing healing herbs under his tongue.

"Drink, my king," one murmured. "You are safe."

Elrond blinked, remembering fragments—Mugumar's face, the battle, the shadows—and his jaw clenched.

"I must speak with him," he rasped. "Something darker is at work here."

And beyond the horizon, in the shadows yet untouched by war, something watched and waited, whispering still.

The smoke still curled from the rooftops of Eldirin, casting drifting shadows through the shattered lanes and blood-slicked alleyways. The city groaned with the weight of survival. Among the still-burning taverns and broken towers, three dwarves staggered through the ruined streets—scattered during the brutal flow of battle, now seeking one another like brothers lost in a storm.

Gurin stepped into the market square first, axe still crusted with dark blood, his helm bent on one side. He looked about, eyes narrowed, until he saw a stocky figure limping across the rubble.

"Fimly!" Gurin called, voice hoarse. "By the black beard of Beldrak, it's damn well good to see you're still breathin'!"

Fimly stumbled forward, blood and soot covering most of his armor, beard tangled in gore. His voice came muffled as always, his mouth somewhere beneath that vast curtain of hair.

"Gmfffg... blade... orc... was... troll!" he growled, waving one arm in vague explanation before slumping against a broken statue base.

Then came Mordil, dragging his warhammer behind him and swigging from his waterskin. He poured a stream of water into his palm, splashing it over his face and shaking his head.

"Bloody hells," Mordil muttered. "That was a battle. A good one. One to tell your grandkids when your beard's gone grey and your teeth have gone off drinkin'."

They walked slowly together toward the edge of the ruined square, where a once-thriving tavern lay in smoldering ruin. A barrel had rolled from its broken doors and lay cracked and leaking on the street. Fimly grunted and staggered over, pried the cork loose, and from the moment the foam spurted, they were dwarves again.

They drank. They drank like beasts.

Gurin downed his share and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “To the dead,” he said.

“To the living!” Mordil added.

Fimly, already halfway through his second mug, grunted, “Mmmrfffph!” and tipped the rest down. Ale poured from his beard like a waterfall. He took a step back, slipped on the cobbles, and went down with a thud, face-first into the street.

“By the hammers!” Mordil laughed, helping him up. “You plant potatoes better than that!”

Fimly groaned, still spitting curses into his beard, “Mrrrfff...slippery bastard street...”

Elsewhere in the city, King Mugumar stood atop the high eastern gate, staring at the horizon. Behind him, the dwarven banners waved high, and his troops, now eight thousand strong, gathered once more. Soot-covered and tired, they still found their voices for the victory songs. They marched out of Eldirin, feet trudging through ash and mud, beards swaying in the wind as the songs of battle rang through the broken trees lining the road.

By evening, they arrived in Goldan. The iron gates swung wide, and cheers rose from the carved terraces. The army dispersed—back to homes, forges, hearths. Tales of battle were already being spoken in loud tavern halls, mugs raised to the sky, scribes listening carefully with quills scratching into parchment.

Mugumar, however, did not join the celebration.

In his royal chamber, firelight flickered against the stone walls, casting long shadows. He stood alone, staring into the crackling flames in the hearth, deep in thought. A goblet of dark wine rested on the table, untouched.

“Who sent the orcs?” he muttered, fingers running through his beard. “They weren’t after gold… not just land either… Too sudden. Too organized.”

He rubbed the blackened scar on his arm from the wraith’s touch.

“Elrond didn’t send the assassin. I saw it in his eyes… That fear was real.” He sighed, gripping the armrest of his stone chair.

“But someone sent them. Some dark will commands these beasts. There is an orc lord behind this… I can feel it like a crack in the stone beneath me.”

And as the dwarven king stared deeper into the fire, a shadow seemed to dance in the flickering flame—a figure, distant and cloaked, eyes like burning coal—and Mugumar knew the war was not over.

Heirloom

Morning sunlight filtered softly through the ivy-wrapped window arches of the royal chamber, casting golden beams upon the polished wood floor. The city beyond still carried the fresh scars of war—burned rooftops, shattered bridges, and the sound of hammers echoing through the valleys as elves worked day and night to restore what was lost.

King Elrond stirred from his silken bed, the linen sheets tangled from troubled dreams. He rose, still dressed in a loose emerald tunic, and walked barefoot across the cool floor to a tall wooden closet in the corner of the room. Opening its carved doors, he reached inside, fingers brushing past robes and folded linens until they found a smooth box of pale rosewood, its corners adorned with ancient elven markings.

He pulled it out carefully and opened it.

Inside lay a golden ring, inset with a flawless emerald that shimmered with a deep, almost hypnotic green. Elrond stared at it for a long moment, recognizing it immediately. The Ring of Thalion.

“My grandfather’s,” he whispered.

No one had worn it since the day that troubled king had died, left to gather dust in the quiet years of peace. Thalion the Stern, a king both feared and questioned, who had ruled in a time when elves fought more among themselves than with any outer threat.

Elrond held the ring to the light, the gem catching the sun like it was alive. The memory of his mother once speaking in hushed tones came to him—how the ring was believed to have been touched by something older, something not of their kind.

He slid it onto his finger. The metal was cold, then warm, then oddly weightless.

Nothing happened. At least… nothing he noticed.

He stepped into his receiving chamber, where two maids bowed low and offered him a tray of elven greens, tree leaves dressed in sweet dew and spices, thin slices of deer meat resting beside soft-rooted vegetables. Elrond ate slowly, distracted, fingers absently tapping the table, eyes straying now and then to the ring.

But far to the north, in the cold black tower of Guldhad, something stirred.

Within a chamber veiled in shadows, the Black Wizard stood barefoot upon a stone circle etched in runes. The firelight from the braziers flickered unnaturally, dancing as though alive. Before him hovered a seething cloud of black mist, shifting like a living thing.

“Reveal him,” he hissed.

He lifted his arms and began to chant, his voice scraping against the very air. “Us’kval dhe narhûl, vun’tarash ul-morën...”

The shadows coalesced. A ghostly image shimmered into view—a hand, wearing a ring with a brilliant green jewel. The image rose, and for a flash, Elrond’s face appeared, calm and unaware.

“There you are…” the Black Wizard whispered.

“Sharnan vu’doth… ulth nagûr valûm…” (*awaken ancient one*)

Back in Eldirin, the ring’s emerald shimmered faintly—once, then dulled. Elrond gave it a glance, noticed nothing unusual, and returned to his meal.

By midday, he summoned his steward and guards. In the great hall, a wooden chest lined with gold plates and velvet was filled to the brim with elven jewelry, forged blades, scrolls of ancient wisdom, and glimmering ingots of star-metal. Elrond stood over it, watching the last item—a circlet of silver leaves—placed on top.

He turned to the courier, a high-ranking guard in leaf-green armor.

“Take this to King Mugumar of Goldan,” he said. “And with it, this letter.”

He handed over a scroll, sealed with green wax stamped with the crest of Eldirin.

“Speak these words if he allows you audience: ‘I know this is nothing of value to repay for your help in saving our city. Accept this gift as the least we can offer. We are forever in the dwarven lords’ debt.’”

The courier bowed deeply. “As you command, my king.”

Elrond nodded, but his gaze drifted to the ring again, a weightless thing on his hand. He frowned faintly.

“Strange,” he murmured. “I could have sworn it felt warmer before…”

And far away, in the shadows of Guldhad, the Black Wizard sat in silence—eyes closed, smiling slightly—listening.

As the months passed, the once-vibrant forests encircling Eldirin began to wither. Leaves curled into brittle husks, bark blackened, and the air grew heavy with decay. The elves, bewildered by the spreading blight, took to felling the corrupted trees in hopes of halting the rot's advance.

In the heart of the city, Elrond sat alone in his chamber, eyes fixed on the wall, his thoughts a tangled web.

"The paper... I placed it here," he murmured, glancing at the empty table. "There must be writings... no... Who sent the assassin to Mugumar? Was it me? No... I couldn't have... We had a deal."

His gaze fell upon the emerald ring adorning his finger. He reached out, touching it with his other hand, a strange compulsion overtaking him.

"Grandfather... I carry this ring... with me from now on, every day. I won't... nobody will take it... This is ours... this is mine... mine only!"

Meanwhile, in the shadowed woods, a group of elven warriors gathered around a felled, blackened tree.

"This rot spreads faster each day," one observed grimly.

Another, eyes narrowed, added, "It's the dwarven mages. They've cursed our lands, seeking our ruin."

A third stepped forward, voice raised, "How can you accuse them? They stood beside us, bled with us to save Eldirin!"

The tension snapped. Words turned to shouts, shouts to blows. One elf seized a stone, striking another with such force that he crumpled to the ground, blood seeping into the earth.

Back in the city, Elrond's behavior grew erratic. He drank deeply, his words slurring, eyes vacant as he stared into the hearth.

"The dwarven lords... no, they couldn't have... they helped us... Someone within our circle is poisoning the trees... I must find the traitor."

The once-noble king's descent into paranoia cast a shadow over Eldirin, as the rot outside mirrored the decay within.

The forests of Eldirin, once proud and shimmering with life, had begun to grow sick and mournful. Black veins crept along the roots of the great oaks, and the air smelled of mold and bitterness. Among the woods, patrols of elves and dwarves once allied in blood were now at each other’s throats. Skirmishes broke out in the shadowed clearings and along the old paths near Millow Point.

“You bring rot wherever you walk,” one elven captain spat, drawing a curved blade on a stunned dwarven patrol. “Your mages have cursed our trees!”

The dwarves bristled, axes raised in disbelief. “Lies, elf! We save yer city, and now you spit in our faces!”

A clash of metal followed, short but vicious. Blood was spilled again, this time under old trees groaning in their death throes.

Back in Goldan, King Mugumar sat at his stone table, fist clenched around a goblet of wine, eyes dark beneath his heavy brow. The missives of these minor conflicts piled before him like rot themselves.

He called for a scribe and penned a letter.

“To King Elrond of Eldirin — we stood together once, bled together. I see now you’re not the elf I knew, not the one who shook my hand under the stars. Keep peace before the last thread frays, or we’ll all hang by it.”

A courier was sent at once, but Mugumar knew words would not be enough. He stared toward the north with heavy thought. A reply came soon afterwards.

To King Mugumar of the Stone Beneath, Lord of Iron Roots and Hammered Halls,

You speak of threads and fraying, of peace like a woolen cloth that can be patched by dwarven fingers. But you do not hear the trees — no, of course you don’t. You cut them, burn them, grind them into dust and call it order. But I… I hear them now. They whisper in dead winds and creak beneath the black bark. They are angry. They remember.

You ask me to be calm, Mugumar. You ask me to keep peace. What is peace but the silence between thunderclaps? A trick of breath before the scream? When the sky peels open and the blood-soaked roots of truth hang before his eyes like ribbons of fate?

Do not speak to me of peace, mountain-king. You drink your wine and scratch runes into stones, but I have seen deeper. The ring... the ring has shown me the pulse of the forest and the deceit under the stones.

Was it not your halls that first trembled with footsteps of shadow? Did you not let the darkness in while calling it stonecraft and firelight? Did your mages not pluck spells from the dark like fruit from cursed trees?

You say I change. Yes, I have changed. I remember what my grandfather forgot, what the gods buried in roots older than your mountains. I know now.

Stay in your halls, Mugumar. Protect your ore and your fires. I will not be lectured by a king who cannot see the sap bleeding from the trees.

We are not at war. We are beneath it. And something is listening.

—Elrond, Son of Morlen, King of Eldirin, Keeper of the Ring Unyielding

“Elrond’s gone mad,” he muttered. “But madness leaves trails. I’ll find them.”

He summoned one of his most trusted scouts — Bargrim, a lean dwarf with eyes like flint and steps silent as smoke.

“You’re heading to orc lands,” Mugumar told him. “Find out who’s behind the assassin that crept into my hall. I want names. I want answers.”

Bargrim nodded, already pulling his cloak over his shoulder. “I’ll bring you both, my king.”

The journey was long. Bargrim passed through the pine-crushed slopes of the Mistshrouds, crossed cold rivers by moonlight, and wandered through ruined trails where trees stood like charred bones. He kept to the shadows, camping without fire, watching the stars for direction.

After weeks, he reached the blasted hills beyond Guldhad. The air was dry and cruel there, smelling of soot and blood. He hid among the rocks, waited for an orc patrol to pass, and then followed them to a carved tunnel entrance flanked with skull-topped pikes. The orcs spoke in snarls and grunts, and Bargrim, cloaked in mud and shadow, slipped into the blackened underways.

Inside, the tunnels twisted like serpent maws. Fires burned in long pits, and forges rang with brutal rhythm. Bargrim climbed into a half-collapsed ventilation shaft and crawled through the soot until he reached a grate. Below, he saw them — orc warlords hunched over a stone table, and at its head, a tall figure robed in black, his face hidden beneath a hood lined with silver glyphs.

The Black Wizard of Guldhad.

“More rot in the forest,” one orc grunted, scratching his tusk. “Elves scream at dwarves while we watch.”

The wizard chuckled coldly. “Good. Let them claw each other.”

“And the dwarf king?” asked another.

“He suspects little,” the wizard said, raising a hand that shimmered with dark light. “Let him. He too will fall. In time. In time.”

Bargrim’s heart pounded. He turned, slipping back into the dark shaft, every move slow and careful. There was much to tell the king — of plots, of poison not seen in centuries.

Back in Eldirin, elven mages stood beneath the blackened trees, their hands raised in silent chants, trying to breathe life into dying roots. But the trees did not listen. The forest wept, and above it all, Elrond stood in his chamber, staring again at the emerald ring, whispering something too faint to hear, lost in a voice that was no longer entirely his own.

Bargrim trudged through the gates of Goldan just as the mountain sun dipped behind the peaks. His cloak was torn, his boots clotted with dried mud and ash, and his eyes held the hard distance of one who had seen more than he wished. Without waiting to rest, he marched to the king’s keep.

King Mugumar looked up from his stone seat as the scout entered. “Well, speak, Bargrim. You look like death gave you a piggyback ride.”

Bargrim bowed briefly, then spoke in a low tone. “My king, I reached the orc stronghold near Guldhad. Slipped past the patrols, climbed the vents. I saw the Black Wizard himself—tall, cloaked, face hidden in shadows like some forgotten curse. He spoke of rot spreading in the forest. Of kings falling.”

Mugumar leaned forward, brow furrowed. “He mentioned me?”

Bargrim shook his head. “Not by name. But he spoke of the forest dying. Of discord between dwarves and elves. He seemed...pleased by it. Like all this was planned.”

Mugumar grunted. “Aye, that much I figured. Still no proof of who sent that dagger-bearing worm into my chambers.” He waved Bargrim off. “Get rest. You’ve earned it.”

Meanwhile, deep in the forest near Millow Point, Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil stood before a massive tree, blackened like burnt oak, its bark splitting with thick sap that oozed like old tar. They prodded the roots, unsure what blight this was, when a creak echoed—long, slow, like old wood waking from a thousand-year slumber.

The trunk groaned and split, and a face formed in the bark, long and sorrowful. The tree shifted its limbs, cracking brittle branches that rained dead leaves like ash.

Fimly stumbled back, eyes wide. “By me beard’s last braid... it’s alive!”

The ancient ent’s voice came low and thunderous, like roots breaking stone.

“What... have you done... to our forest, dwarflings...?”

Gurin raised his hands. “We’ve done nothing! The trees turned black by themselves. We came to look—nothing more!”

The ent’s face twisted in grief. “The rot... I feel it gnaw at my bones. The whispers crawl... like termites in the mind. This... is no sickness of nature. This is... old magic... dark... forgotten.”

Mordil stepped closer. “Can it be stopped?”

The ent stood still for a long moment. Birds did not sing. The forest held its breath.

“Long ago,” the ent rumbled, “before the elves raised their first bowstring... before dwarves hollowed the first hall from stone... there were others. Walkers in shadow. They carried rings... forged in the wells of night. One ring was cast away, hidden... buried in bark and bone, sealed with sap and silence.”

The ent’s branches sagged as if under great weight. “I do not know where... but it has awoken. I... feel it. Like cold rain in my soul.”

Then the ent gave a long sigh. The glow in his carved eyes faded, and he collapsed slowly, branches cracking, falling into the forest floor with a heavy thud that shook the moss and stones.

Silence followed. A stillness too heavy to be natural.

Fimly muttered, “Bloody hells, I think me heart’s stuck in me throat.”

Gurin said, “So, a ring, cursed and ancient... hidden and now found.”

Mordil looked to the others. “We need to go back. Tell the king. This isn't just elf and dwarf problems anymore.”

They stood there a moment longer, beside the lifeless black husk of the ent, the air thick with secrets and the distant creak of other trees beginning to stir.

In the heart of Goldan, the great hall buzzed with the hum of war-scarred veterans and the smell of burnt oak from the hearths. Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil, still flecked with dirt and the soot of the forest, stood at the massive doors of the keep.

“We have urgent tidings for the king,” Gurin said to the guards, straightening his posture.

A moment later, a young steward led them into the throne chamber. King Mugumar sat brooding beneath a high arch of stone, his crown of iron and silver glinting dully in the firelight. His eyes narrowed at the sight of the trio.

Fimly coughed and stepped forward. “M’lord, we met a tree and we-”

Mugumar blinked. “A what?”

“A tree. Tall one. Blackened like burnt coal. It moved and talked to us in the forest,” Mordil said, “Said it felt rot in its veins, dark magic. Spoke of an ancient ring, cursed—carrying powers from long before elves or dwarves even walked these lands.”

The king’s brow furrowed. “A talking tree. Right.” He turned to his left. “You hearing this, Archmage?”

The dwarven court mage, a wizened dwarf named Korlan with a beard braided, stepped forward and adjusted his staff.

“It’s possible, my king. The ents are rare, but not myth. Ancient spirits of the forest, older than our halls. If it spoke of a ring tied to the blight, then it must be heeded.”

Mugumar stroked his beard in thought. “So the orcish black wizard… he spoke of rot and of kings falling. Perhaps he sent the assassin. Perhaps he seeks to unravel both our realms. And this ring… what power does it hold? If it’s in play, and Elrond’s already dancing on the edge of madness…”

He grunted, then reached for a parchment and quill.

“To King Elrond of Eldirin — I write to you with heavy thoughts and heavier truths. A scout has returned from orcish lands. The Black Wizard of Guldhad plots something vast, and our old quarrels are but embers in his fire. He spoke of rot. Of kings falling. I believe he seeks

our deaths. There is talk of an ancient ring, cursed and buried in shadows, now awake. I fear it, and I fear what it touches. Be wary, Elrond. Watch your people. And your mind."

He handed the sealed scroll to a courier. "Run like your beard's on fire."

The courier raced down mountain paths, through thick woods, over rivers. At Eldirin, he presented the letter to the royal guard and was escorted directly to Elrond's chambers.

Elrond sat by a long window, the emerald ring on his finger glinting in the morning light. He took the letter silently and read it, eyes narrowing as he reached the mention of the ring. His lips tightened. He looked to the ring but quickly turned away.

"The orcs…" he muttered. "Dark magic… they're poisoning the roots beneath our feet. This cannot be coincidence. The dwarves… they saved us once."

He called his captains.

"Send scouts to the borders. Triple the watches along the dark forests. I want eyes on every movement. If the orcs rise again, we'll be ready this time."

Then he took parchment and wrote back.

"To King Mugumar, Stonehammer of Goldan — you speak truly. I fear you more than know. The woods rot and my people are restless. If there is a ring, I do not know its bearer — but I believe you. We must not fall to old hatreds again. The orcs are the true enemy. I ask you to be vigilant. Enlarge your patrols. Watch the shadows. And if the time comes again — I will stand with you."

The message was sealed and sent back with haste.

In both cities, bells rang to summon captains. Weapons were counted, watchfires stoked. For in the trees, something still whispered. And it was listening.

Elrond sat hunched in his chambers, the morning light casting a faint gold sheen across the stone floor, glinting against the emerald in his ring. His fingers moved over it slowly, again and again, the way one might stroke the back of a resting serpent. His thoughts wandered — circling, twisting, darkening.

"Mugumar…" he whispered. "The mountain king… always speaking of peace. But is it peace he seeks — or the slow swallowing of our lands? Has he not eyed the riverbanks and lowlands for years?"

His eyes narrowed, fingers tightening into a fist. "What ring does he speak of? What bearer? If he knows of a ring and hides it, why not reveal more? Why these riddles? Is he playing me for a fool?"

The chamber door creaked as a maid stepped in, cradling a bundle of firewood and a carafe of wine.

“Forgive the intrusion, my king, but I—”

Elrond snapped upright, his eyes wide with sudden fury.

“Who dares enter the king’s quarters without permission?!”

The maid stumbled back. “I knocked, my lord, I did—”

He was already upon her, a hand pushing her out the door, his boot catching her rear with a solid kick. She yelped and tumbled into the corridor, the firewood clattering in all directions.

“Out! Let shadows bring me warmth before I let fools disturb my thoughts!”

She fled down the hallway, sobbing softly. Elrond stood panting, the ring pulsing faintly green on his hand. He turned back into the room, closing the door with trembling fingers. He stared at the wall for a long time before muttering to himself.

“The orcs. The wizard. Mugumar… what if they’re aligned? What if this was their plan? To help us, then bleed us.”

He sat heavily on his chair, rubbing his temples, then suddenly muttered, “No… no. Mugumar fought the orcs. He bled on our walls. He saved our city. It can’t be… it can’t…”

But doubt gnawed at the edge of his mind like rats behind a wall.

Meanwhile, in the darkening woods and misty ravines near the hills, orc warbands had returned. In clusters of twenty to thirty, armored in mismatched iron and bone, they raided river crossings and merchant trails.

South of Millow Point, a band of twenty orcs crept through a fog-laden glade toward a dwarven supply caravan. Before they could strike, the clash of metal rang out — a dozen dwarves, hammers raised, intercepted them.

“By the beard of the mountains, ye picked the wrong road!” shouted a dwarf captain, his axe cleaving the first orc in two.

The orcs roared in response, blades flashing in the dusk. The fight was brutal, axes clanged against curved swords, shields splintered, and cries of pain echoed through the trees.

As the dwarves began to falter under the weight of numbers, a high whistle pierced the air. Arrows rained from the tree line. Elven warriors descended in swift silence, blades glinting with silver light. The orcs, surprised and flanked, were quickly overpowered.

“Glad to see your lot hasn’t forgotten aim,” the dwarf captain grunted, nodding to an elven scout as they surveyed the corpses.

“We remember the debt,” the elf replied. “And these lands are ours too, no matter what claws tread them.”

On another path, closer to Goldan, Mordil, Gurin, and Fimly led a unit of mountain scouts along a ravine trail. They heard the echo of war cries and rushed forward — finding a skirmish in full fury, orcs clashing with both dwarves and elves.

Fimly growled, charging with his axe raised. “Ahh, back in the game again!”

Mordil swung his warhammer, sending an orc flying against a boulder, skull shattered. Gurin smashed shield to face and yelled, “To the Stone! To the Leaf!”

The fight was won, but the cost was high — bodies littered the mossy soil, and the air was thick with the scent of iron and smoke.

Back in Goldan, word of the renewed orc movements reached Mugumar. He studied a map in the war hall, his brow tight with concern.

“Something’s stirring again,” he said to his commanders. “The elves fight beside us, but their king... he’s grown pale and distant.”

He glanced to the high window, wind whistling in. “We may yet need to strike at the root, not the rot.”

In the weeks that followed, a creeping dread settled over Eldirin and Goldan. The blight, once confined to the trees, had begun to manifest in the people themselves. Elves and dwarves alike awoke to find dark patches marring their skin, the discoloration spreading like ink in water. These blemishes were accompanied by a debilitating weakness, rendering many bedridden with fever and chills.

In Eldirin, the once-vibrant melodies of the forest were replaced by the mournful wails of the afflicted. Healers and mages worked tirelessly, their efforts often in vain as the blight resisted traditional remedies. The city's infirmaries overflowed, and makeshift shelters were erected to house the growing number of the sick.

Goldan fared no better. The dwarves, known for their resilience, found themselves succumbing to the mysterious ailment. Workshops fell silent as craftsmen were struck down, their tools left untouched. The city's forges, once the heart of dwarven industry, cooled as blacksmiths took to their beds.

The blight did not discriminate. Children and elders, warriors and scholars—all were vulnerable. Communities were torn apart as families mourned their losses. The air grew heavy with despair, and whispers of a curse spread among the populace.

Despite the chaos, acts of compassion emerged. Elven healers crossed into dwarven lands, offering their aid. Dwarven alchemists shared their knowledge of potions and remedies. Together, they sought a cure, their shared suffering forging a bond between the two races.

Yet, amidst the cooperation, fear lingered. The source of the blight remained unknown, and suspicions festered. Some whispered that the other race was to blame, that the blight was a

weapon unleashed by ancient enemies. Tensions simmered beneath the surface, threatening to undo the fragile alliance.

As the blight continued its relentless advance, hope waned. The once-proud cities of Eldirin and Goldan stood on the brink, their people united in suffering but divided by fear. The path forward was uncertain, and the shadow of the blight loomed ever larger.

In the solemn halls of Goldan, beneath the vaulted arches carved with dwarven runes of old, King Mugumar IV sat heavily upon his granite throne. The light of the hearth cast deep shadows across his brow, which was now etched with lines of care and doubt. He gripped a thick scroll of parchment in his hand, his quill scratching hastily across its surface.

“To King Elrond of Eldirin,” he wrote, “I summon you not as a rival, but as a fellow ruler who shares a common affliction among his people. This blight—this blackness—threatens us all. Come to Goldan, that we may speak plainly of this.”

The message was sealed with wax and pressed with the emblem of the Hammered Crown. A courier set off at once, darting through the forest trails and mountain passes with all haste.

Days later, the dwarven horns sounded from the outer gates—Elrond had arrived. Flanked by a small retinue of silent warriors, the Elven King walked through Goldan’s vast stone corridors. He was changed. His once-bright eyes were now pitch black, no whites to be seen, like twin obsidian stones. His skin was pallid and discolored, stained in places with the rot that had struck thousands—but unlike the others, Elrond stood tall, proud, and strangely content.

When he entered the war chamber, Mugumar and his archmages rose from the stone table.

“Elrond,” Mugumar said cautiously, “you wear the disease, yet it seems to have no hold over your strength. How is this?”

Elrond’s lips curled into a faint, unsettling smile. He walked to the table with deliberate grace and placed his hands upon the cold stone. His fingers tapped softly—tap, tap—on the surface as his thumb stroked the golden emerald ring that glittered on his left hand.

“There are forces in this world, Mugumar,” Elrond said slowly, his voice laced with honey and ash, “older than dwarves and elves. Forces that watch. Forces that remember.”

The archmages exchanged wary glances. One of them, an elderly dwarf with a long silvery beard named Halgar, spoke up, “My lord Elrond, your condition is... troubling. As are your words. We must examine any enchantments that may be afflicting you. As a precaution, we ask that all in this chamber remove any magical items, especially rings.”

Elrond’s hand froze mid-stroke on the ring.

“You *ask* me?” he said, and his voice turned sharp. “You *order* a king to remove what is his by blood, by memory? This ring belonged to my grandfather. It is mine by right.”

“Elrond,” Mugumar said slowly, rising from his chair, “this is not about power. It is about the sickness. There’s something wrong.”

The air in the chamber grew cold. A flicker of darkness shimmered behind Elrond—a shadow tall and shapeless, coiling in the torchlight like smoke from a dying fire. The mages stepped back, murmuring incantations beneath their breath.

“Elrond...” Halgar whispered, his eyes wide. “There’s something with you. Something not of this world.”

Elrond’s eyes glinted black as coal.

He growled. “I came in peace, but I will not be insulted by superstitious old fools.”

Mugumar narrowed his eyes, watching the ring more than Elrond now.

“You shall not have it!” Elrond snapped, and the shadow at his back curled upward like a serpent ready to strike. Then, just as quickly, it faded, vanishing into the torches' flickering light. Elrond smoothed his robe and composed himself, though the tension remained like a blade’s edge in the room.

“I came to speak of unity,” he said coldly, “but if this is the welcome I am given, perhaps I should speak no more.”

The room fell silent, the air thick with uncertainty. Mugumar stared at Elrond with quiet dread, realizing now more than ever that something far darker than politics was at play

The heavy doors of the chamber creaked open and the party stepped in—Fimly, his beard still matted with soot and dried blood from battles past; Gurin, stoic and steady as stone; and Mordil, his shield slung across his back and eyes sharp with memory. King Mugumar gestured for them to approach.

"My friends," Mugumar said gravely, "tell King Elrond what you saw in the woods. The tree. The ent."

Fimly nodded, stepping forward. "Aye, my king," he said, beard bouncing as he spoke. "We came upon a blackened tree, or what we thought was one. Turned out to be an ent—ancient, deep-voiced, more bark than beast. He said the rot was not natural. Dark magic, he called it. Spoke of an old power... a ring, cursed, forgotten. Said it once walked this land before even your folk settled Eldirin, Elrond."

Elrond stood silently by the hearth, his blackened eyes glinting in the firelight. Then, slowly, he tilted his head back and laughed—a low, echoing, hollow sound that rang strange against the stone walls.

"Ah yes," he said, his voice smooth and oily, "the ents. Our ancient treefolk. Wise? Perhaps. But wisdom is no shield against madness. A tree blackened with rot may see demons in every shadow. Even its own roots."

The archmages exchanged tense glances. One, the eldest of them, leaned close to Mugumar and whispered, "My lord... the ring. It pulses with a shadow. A darkness wrapped tight. It is not of elven or dwarven make."

Mugumar turned to Elrond. His voice was calm, but stern.

"Elrond. For the realms' sake... remove the ring."

Elrond's hands twitched. His gaze darkened further, the pitch of blackness swelling in his eyes, drowning all color. His face twisted, contorted between pain and fury. But after a long breath, he exhaled.

"For the realms' sake," he repeated quietly, and removed the ring. His hand trembled as he laid it on the stone table between them. A hush fell across the chamber.

The archmages stepped forward, hands glowing faintly with blue incantation sigils as they formed a circle around the ring. Soft chanting rose, words of warding, of binding, of unshrouding.

The moment the spell wrapped around the ring, the air grew ice-cold. A soundless thud rippled through the room. The torches dimmed.

From the ring, a smoky shadow began to rise—coiling, twitching, writhing like a creature long imprisoned and now stirred. It hovered above the table, a swirling specter of darkness. Cold whispers spread through the chamber like wind through a graveyard.

One of the mages stepped back, his face pale. He whispered hoarsely into Mugumar's ear, "There is death trapped within... a curse that clings like rot to the soul. This ring is no heirloom—it is a vessel of ancient sorrow. A weapon disguised as memory."

Elrond, now seated at the far end of the room, clutched his head with both hands, as though something were screaming within.

Mugumar leaned close to Fimly, his voice low, his eyes fierce with purpose.

"Take it," he whispered. "Take the ring and destroy it. You know where the fire runs deep. The chasm at the end of the southern tunnel—lava pours into the dark like the breath of the earth's anger. That's where it must go."

Fimly nodded once, solemnly. Gurin took the ring from the table and wrapped it in a thick cloth, tying it to his belt. The three dwarves turned without a word and strode from the chamber, boots echoing down the stone halls. Behind them, the torchlight flickered uneasily.

Elrond sat still in his chair, eyes closed, his breath slow, as if meditating. For a moment there was quiet.

Then his eyes snapped open.

"The ring," he whispered. "Where is my ring?"

Darkness bloomed like ink in water around his chair, swirling like smoke with no flame. His voice hollowed, no longer purely his own.

“Mugumar,” he said, rising slowly to his feet. “Give me my ring. Now.”

Mugumar stood tall, face carved from granite. “Oh no, my friend. That ring will never again curl around your finger. It must be unmade, for all our sakes.”

Elrond’s lips twitched, his eyes gleamed, and then rage overtook him. In one sweeping motion, he drew his sword, the steel catching the chamber light in a blaze of silver.

“THEN YOU DIE WITH THE REST!” he roared.

The archmages, prepared for his madness, began chanting—sigils and light curling into the air around him, spells to bind and hold. For a moment, it worked. He froze mid-step, eyes wild, veins bulging black across his temples.

Then he laughed—no longer the laugh of a king, but of something deeper, something ancient and unhinged. It rattled the stone walls.

With a scream and a violent surge, he broke the spell like shattered glass and leapt forward, his sword carving through air and flesh. Five archmages fell in seconds, heads thudding to the cold stone floor, their blood pooling like ink beneath their robes.

Elrond’s men, shocked but still loyal, drew their blades. Mugumar’s guards bellowed, steel meeting steel in a flash of blood and screams.

“You mad maggot!” Mugumar shouted, ducking a slash and swinging his axe in a wide arc. “What in all nine hells has crawled into your skull?”

Elrond turned to face him. His face twisted, flesh cracking like old bark, and beneath it—red, pulsing, feverish skin like living magma. He sneered, revealing too many teeth.

“DAMN YOU, DWARVEN SCUM!” he bellowed.

And in an instant, he turned and burst through the chamber doors, a trail of warped air and fire behind him.

Meanwhile, the party were rushing down the spiral-cut tunnel into the deep southern shaft. The heat thickened, sweat beading on their brows. Gurin had the ring tight at his side. The glow of lava was beginning to pulse up through the cracks in the tunnel ahead.

“Faster!” Mordil shouted, glancing back.

Behind them, the walls trembled with Elrond’s wrath. They could feel him gaining, his steps unnaturally swift. A sound—half snarl, half scream—echoed behind them.

Suddenly Fimly stumbled, tripping over a loose stone, tumbling forward into the dust. He growled, spat, rolled, and climbed back to his feet, a streak of blood on his cheek.

“Go! Mfffph, GO!” he bellowed, and the party pressed on, the heat rising, the shadows of Elrond’s rage chasing them ever closer through the dark.

The stone hall at the edge of the chasm trembled with a terrible silence as the party skidded to a halt, boots scraping on the rock. Before them yawned the great abyss—an endless pit of fire and shadow, its breath rising in searing waves that shimmered the air. Below, molten rivers of lava pulsed and churned in the ancient belly of the world.

Gurin stepped to the edge, the wrapped ring in his palm. He stared down into the fire.

Then came the footsteps. The slow, deliberate, echoing footsteps.

From the shadows at the far end of the hall emerged Elrond—no longer clad in finery nor flesh. His robes hung tattered from his shoulders, his skin was torn and blackened like scorched bark. Eyes of perfect, bottomless pitch. From his cracked lips, pus flowed, thick and steaming. And from within his mouth came a voice deeper than the chasm itself.

“Give me the ring,” the voice snarled, guttural and cruel. “Give me the ring now... or die.”

The party turned, their faces streaked with sweat and ash. Fimly tightened his grip on his axe. Mordil readied his hammer. Gurin hesitated a second too long.

In that instant, Elrond raised his hand.

A wave of dark force burst from his fingers. It hit the three dwarves like a landslide, knocking them off their feet and sending them sprawling onto the stone platform. Gurin gasped as invisible hands gripped him, lifting him into the air, limbs dangling helplessly, his throat slowly closing.

“Fools,” the voice rasped. “You think you can hide it from ME?”

Cracks split across Elrond’s skin with wet snaps. His joints as his form buckled and burst. Red sinew surged beneath as his body warped grotesquely. His face tore down the center. Horns twisted through bone with a sound like rending iron. When the last shred of flesh fell, what stood before them was no elf.

It was a demon.

Wrapped in pulsing red muscle, black bone spines, and a crown of twisted horns. Smoke hissed from its gaping mouth, and its eyes burned twin coals of hate.

“The ring,” it growled. “It is mine. It was always mine.”

Darkness poured from its body like ink bleeding into the stone, swallowing the torchlight, devouring the edges of the hall. The demon lifted both arms. Invisible pressure gripped Fimly and Mordil—lifting them into the air, crushing their chests, bending their limbs. They gasped, clawing for breath, eyes bulging.

The weight was unbearable. The air had turned to stone. Their lungs refused to draw another breath. Their weapons slipped from their hands.

“Your souls will feed the fire,” the demon hissed, laughing low and long, the sound a hammer on bone and despair.

From the edge of the abyss, Gurin struggled to lift his arm, the ring still wrapped tight in his fist.

If he could just... move... an inch more...

With a sickening snap of unseen power, the ring tore itself free from Gurin’s bloodied grip and flew through the air like a raven diving on prey. It landed perfectly upon the clawed finger of the demon. A surge of black light erupted from the creature’s form, flaring in pulsing waves that cracked the walls around them and sent molten dust raining from the ceiling.

The dwarves collapsed to the stone, gasping, the choking force gone. But not for long.

“Now,” the demon growled, its voice no longer Elrond’s but something ancient and filled with vile glee, “you die by the hands of your savior.”

Fimly, his breath ragged, spat a glob of blood to the side and roared, “Mfffph... yer no king, yer a blister on the arse of the earth!”

He launched himself forward, axe raised. Gurin and Mordil followed, weapons ready, the flame of desperation burning in their eyes. They struck in unison, hammer, mace, axe—steel against flesh that smoked where it hit. The demon roared and backhanded Fimly, sending him flying across the stone like a rag doll. Gurin dove to shield him while Mordil slammed his warhammer into the beast’s leg, shattering bone with a crunch.

But the demon retaliated with a fury of dark spells. Shadowy tendrils erupted from its body, lashing and curling like whips of living night. One wrapped around Mordil’s waist and slammed him to the ground. The platform trembled under the force of the blows, stones cracking at the edges of the chasm.

Then—flames burst around the arch. A blinding light shot down the tunnel.

Nine archmages in long dark-blue robes stormed into the chamber, staffs blazing, runes etched into their skin glowing bright white. One raised his arms and bellowed, “In the name of the Light of the First Flame, we cast you OUT!”

Arcane bolts of lightning and fire exploded toward the demon. One mage summoned a barrier of light over the dwarves. Another carved sigils into the air, shaping a net of radiant chains that tried to wrap around the fiend.

The demon shrieked in defiance, lifting both clawed hands. From them came torrents of withering black fire, burning the stone itself, melting a mage to bones in an instant. Another was blasted across the hall, colliding with the wall and crumpling, unmoving.

Still, the mages advanced, incanting faster. Ice spears, burning glyphs, sun-flame—they poured their power into the attack. Mordil and Gurin got to their feet, bloodied, and swung their weapons again. Fimly wiped blood from his nose and charged with a defiant howl.

The chamber became a storm of spellfire and steel. Blinding light. Screaming shadow. Flesh scorched. Bones crushed. The demon was driven back, step by step, to the edge of the abyss.

Rot and black filth spilled from its mouth, hissing on the stones. Its eyes flared, smoke pouring from its back. The ring on its finger pulsed violently.

“NO!” it bellowed. “This world is MINE!”

And in that final moment, with all the fury of dwarven might and desperation, Fimly leapt.

He flung himself through the air, axe forgotten, body twisting like a stone from a catapult. He struck the demon with both feet square in the chest.

The creature reeled backward, arms flailing, the ring gleaming once.

Then it fell.

Tumbling into the chasm, its scream echoed for what felt like minutes, growing fainter until the last sound was a splash of molten fire.

And silence.

The ring was no more.

Elrond was gone.

The party stood in silence at the edge of the chasm, breathing heavy, their eyes fixed on the last whorls of black mist vanishing into the molten depths. The silence was not just one of fatigue, but of the ending of something ancient and terrible. Mordil clapped a hand on Fimly’s shoulder, who muttered something unintelligible from deep in his ale-drenched beard, but his meaning was understood. It was done.

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Together with the surviving archmages, their robes torn and faces streaked with soot and sweat, the party made their way back through the long tunnel, up the winding stairs into the

stone-lit halls of Goldan. The dwarf guards, grim and silent, let them pass, and the vast doors of the throne room opened.

Mugumar stood waiting. As the mages bowed and recounted the tale of what had happened—the ring, the demon, the fire—Mugumar sat in thought, face carved in grief and relief alike. When they finished, he let out a long breath.

“At least,” he said, voice thick, “the dwarves and elves are free now. The people and the land can begin to heal.”

And heal they did.

In the weeks that followed, the blackness in the forest began to recede. The once-rotten bark grew firm and warm beneath the touch again, leaves returned to green, and birds dared to sing in the branches once more. The fevered and weak among elves and dwarves slowly regained their strength, and the sickhouses, once full, began to empty. Trade carts rolled again, bearing goods across the rivers and hills. Flour, ore, fine wood, and iron tools moved as freely as the friendships that now formed in the taverns of Eldirin and Goldan.

The elven city, scarred but not broken, turned its gaze to the future. A great gathering was called beneath the silver dome of the Eldirin council hall, where thousands stood in solemn witness. Draped in flowing green and silver robes, with her long hair bound by a circlet of living vine and moonstone, Isandra stood before the people.

Widow of Morlen, mother of no heirs but revered for her compassion and clarity, she was crowned by the eldest druid. As he placed the leaf-wrought crown upon her brow, the crowd erupted in thunderous applause. Elves sang songs that had not been sung in an age. Harps and flutes played in every quarter, and flowers rained down from balconies of carved oak and crystal.

In Goldan, dwarves raised their mugs and voices alike in celebration. Fimly drank until foam clung to his eyebrows, Gurin declared the beer tasted better in peace than in war, and Mordil dropped a whole roast boar onto a table and said, “This is what we fight for, eh?”

In both cities, laughter returned. So did markets, music, and wandering minstrels who now told of the demon king, the cursed ring, and the heroes who saved the realm.

One sunny afternoon, Queen Isandra rode to Goldan with her entourage. Mugumar greeted her personally at the mountain gate. They clasped forearms and exchanged quiet words.

“We bury the past,” Isandra said, “and grow the future.”

“Aye,” said Mugumar, nodding. “And may it grow tall and stubborn as a mountain pine.”

Peace, true and earned, had at last taken root. And the land, having passed through shadow, bloomed again.

Tower of Guldhad

In the long echoing hall of Goldan, torchlight danced on the stone walls as King Mugumar sat at the head of the great table, his thick hands folded and gaze heavy. Around him stood the nine archmages in their deep-hued robes, their faces solemn, and before them stood the familiar trio—Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil—still battered but hardened from the trials of fire and shadow.

“You three,” Mugumar said, voice deep as the mountain roots, “have done what many thought was impossible. But our work is not done. The black wizard still lives, and while his armies are scattered, his tower stands.”

Gurin narrowed his eyes. “We’ll tear it down, stone by stone, if need be.”

Mugumar nodded, then turned to the archmages. “They will not go alone. I’m sending nine of our finest mages. And with them, two hundred warriors. The orcish horde is broken, but Guldhad is no walk in a berry field. The wizard still has teeth.”

Fimly muttered, “Mffff... we’ll yank 'em out.”

The warriors were chosen from the veterans of the last battle—tough, tested, and loyal. By the following dawn, the courtyard of Goldan was alive with the clang of steel and the stomp of boots. Shields were slung over backs, blades sharpened, and flasks filled with ale and dried meat packed for the march.

Mordil slapped his new steel helm onto his head. “This one better not fly off the moment a troll farts,” he joked, tightening the strap.

They marched in disciplined ranks, the nine archmages walking at the front with staves in hand, and the party right behind them. The road to Guldhad wound through dense pinewood forests, across misty valleys and along ridges where old watchtowers lay in ruin. The warriors sang dwarven war songs in rhythmic unison, keeping the march strong.

At night, the campfires glowed in scattered circles, smoke curling into the starlit sky. The air was filled with the smell of smoked boar and pipeweed. One evening, Gurin carved a crude orc out of wood and set it on fire to the roaring laughter of his comrades.

“Burns just like the real thing!” he said, flipping it with his boot.

Fimly, beard soaked in ale, raised a tankard. “To roasting that wizard till his cloak shrinks to a napkin!”

A younger dwarf beside them asked, “Do you think he’s really alone in that tower?”

Mordil leaned in, eyes serious now. “Nothing that foul is ever truly alone. Keep your axe sharp and your heart sharper.”

By the end of the first week, they reached the highlands where the land turned gray and the trees grew twisted. Thunderclouds began to gather more often, and the air felt colder, heavier. The warriors grew quieter at night, their eyes drawn toward the eastern horizon where Guldhad rose in the distance like a fang of blackened stone, untouched by sun.

And still, they marched, knowing the fight was yet to come.

Beneath a slate-gray sky, the dwarven war band emerged from the gnarled pines and beheld the long valley that stretched toward the Tower of Guldhad. The wind was sharp with cold and carried with it the scent of old smoke and ash. The warriors moved in tight formation, boots crunching over frostbitten moss, their armor clinking like distant thunder.

At the far end of the valley, shapes moved—hulking, crude, and foul. A dozen orcs stood watch atop a ridge, iron helms reflecting dull light, their voices harsh and barking to one another. Just below them, two score more began to emerge from a rocky outcropping, war-painted and armored in patchwork steel. One of them blew a blackened war horn that bellowed across the vale.

Gurin grunted. “Looks like they heard us coming.”

Fimly spat into the dirt and hefted his axe. “Mfffph... finally.”

The warriors fanned out, forming a wide crescent. At the center, the nine archmages began murmuring incantations, their staves glowing faintly with runes as winds gathered around them. Mordil raised his warhammer and pointed. “Straight into their black hearts, lads. Make ‘em regret every breath they ever took.”

The orcs howled as they charged, weapons raised—spiked clubs, jagged swords, cruel pikes. The two forces collided in a furious clash of steel and blood. Dwarven shields locked in tight lines, bracing against the charge. The sound was deafening: weapons smashing into armor, roars of fury, the wet crack of bones splitting.

Fimly waded into the thick of the fight like a thunderstorm given form. His axe swung in wide arcs, catching one orc across the jaw and cleaving it open, the beast gurgling as it dropped. Gurin slammed his shield into another’s chest, knocking it backward before finishing it with a stab through the throat. Mordil met a towering brute that bore down on him with a two-handed cleaver—he ducked under the swing and drove his warhammer upward into the orc’s groin, then crushed its skull while it writhed.

“Back to your hellhole, swamp pigs!” he shouted, blood flecked on his beard.

From the rear lines, the mages struck. One raised his staff and summoned a wall of flame that surged across a flank of the battlefield, engulfing several orcs in fire. Another mage unleashed bolts of lightning that arced through the enemy ranks, sending bodies convulsing and falling in smoking heaps. An orc with a horned helm broke through the lines and lunged at a mage, but a nearby dwarf tackled the beast and hacked its spine before it could strike.

The orcs, though frenzied, were not tacticians. Their numbers began to dwindle under the methodical, relentless discipline of the dwarves. In the distance, the black silhouette of the Tower of Guldhad loomed larger, as if watching the slaughter with hungry eyes.

When the final orc was brought down—a beast that took three axes to drop—the warriors stood panting amid the corpses, blood soaking the ground, armor dented, some wounded groaning as they were helped by comrades. Smoke curled from scorched earth where spells had burned the land.

One of the archmages approached the party, his eyes grim. “That was only the outer band. The deeper we go, the worse it shall grow.”

Fimly cleaned his axe with a torn orcish banner and grunted, “Mfffph... let’s keep going.”

Gurin nodded. “We’ll end this at the tower, or we won’t end at all.”

And so they pressed forward, the path to Guldhad littered now with the bodies of those who dared to defend evil.

The dwarves marched with discipline and heavy tread as the looming Tower of Guldhad rose closer, black and jagged against the dim sky. The land around it was scorched and cracked, smoke rising from unseen fissures. The warriors moved with caution, the party and archmages at the front, when suddenly a guttural cry echoed from the ravine ahead.

Out of the cracked earth and from shadowed caverns emerged orcs—not dozens, not scores, but hundreds. A thousand strong, they came snarling from the blackened land like rats from a sinking ship, their eyes glinting with bloodlust, weapons raised high. The dwarves halted. The line bristled with unease.

Mordil growled, “This wasn’t in the plan.”

Gurin’s eyes narrowed. “There weren’t supposed to be this many left.”

Fimly muttered through his thick beard, “Mffmph... it’s a trap.”

The dwarves quickly retreated through a narrow cut between two towering cliffs—a natural chokehold, their only hope. The archmages raised barriers of force and fire at their rear to buy time. The cliffs, though steep and unforgiving, provided defense on both sides. Only a few orcs could enter at a time.

“Hold this mouth!” Mugumar’s captain bellowed as the dwarves took position. Shields locked, the front line braced as the orcs charged.

The first wave smashed into the dwarven front. Axes and blades clanged against steel. The confined space turned the battle into a brutal meat grinder. Orcs climbed over their own dead to reach the defenders, but the dwarves fought with fury, their weapons biting deep.

Fimly ducked under a swinging cleaver and buried his axe into an orc’s ribs, wrenching it free with a wet crack. Gurin knocked one down with his shield and finished it with his mace.

Mordil fought like a possessed beast, his warhammer crushing skulls, breaking knees, and hurling orcs back into the mass behind them.

“Let ‘em come!” Mordil roared. “Let the bastards drown in their own blood!”

Behind the frontline, the archmages cast their spells. Walls of searing light burned the orcs trying to climb the cliffs. Bolts of frost froze clusters of enemies in place before shattering them. Fireballs roared through the air, exploding into bone and ash. Still, the orcs came, driven by something dark, something deeper than vengeance.

One mage fell as a thrown axe struck him in the throat—his body crumpled, light fading from his staff. Another mage stepped in, unleashing a shockwave that hurled back a score of orcs.

The narrow path was soon slick with blood and littered with broken limbs. The dead formed mounds, and yet the dwarves held. They fought with grit and unity, backs against rock, no room for retreat. The clash rang loud in the canyon, echoing like the drums of the end.

“We’ll hold this line,” Gurin shouted, smashing his mace into another attacker. “By the peaks of stone, we do not fall here!”

And they did not. For every fallen dwarf, five orcs died. The narrow cliffs turned the tide in favor of the stout warriors of the mountain, and though their arms bled and their armor cracked, they endured.

As the dwarves stood bloodied and weary, the ground beneath their feet trembled once again—but not from the charge of orcs. A low, deep rumble rolled through the cliffs like a groaning mountain. The surviving dwarves, backs pressed to blood-slick stone, prepared for death. Their line was broken in places, their warriors collapsing one by one, the cries of the wounded mingling with the snarls of orcs that surged with renewed fury.

“Hold the line!” Gurin shouted, though his voice cracked with exhaustion. “Steel to steel, beard to beard! We fall as warriors!”

Orcs surged in like a tide, pressing into the dwarven formation, breaking shields and smashing helmets. Fimly lost his axe and fought with bare fists, snarling through his bloodied beard as he grappled with a towering brute. Mordil’s hammer was dented and chipped, his face painted in soot and gore. The archmages cast desperately, but their power waned—one collapsed in exhaustion, another slain by a jagged orcish spear.

Then, from the left flank, came a sound like trees ripping from the earth, a chorus of snapping roots and creaking bark. Horns rang out, high and clear like birdsong breaking through a storm.

From the thickets and ridge beyond the cliffs surged the elves—five hundred warriors in gleaming green and silver, blades raised and eyes fierce. At their front strode thirty ents, towering and thunderous, their barked limbs as gnarled as ancient roots, eyes burning like mosslit lanterns. The air trembled as they marched, voices booming like thunder.

“Forth for the forest!” cried the lead elf captain, his blade alight with elven runes.

The ents crashed into the orc lines with the wrath of the forest itself. Each swing of a massive limb shattered bone and flung orcs aside like dolls. One ent lifted a group of orcs into the air and crushed them against the stone wall. Another stamped with such force the ground split, and three orcs fell into the crevice, their screams echoing down the darkness.

Elven archers loosed volleys with precision, piercing the gaps in orc armor. Sword-wielding warriors danced among the chaos, fluid as streams, slashing and cutting down orcs in blurs of motion. The orcs, caught between the dwarves and the elves, began to break formation. Yet they fought hard still, their chieftains barking orders in snarled tongues.

Fimly grabbed a fallen axe, let out a war cry like a bear, and charged. Gurin roared beside him, smashing through a dying orc with brute force. Mordil flanked a larger orc berserker and, with the help of an elf warrior, brought it to its knees.

“By the stone, it’s about time you leaf-lovers showed up!” Gurin bellowed as he fought shoulder to shoulder with an elf warrior.

“We heard of your warriors going alone,” the elf replied, parrying a blow and stabbing through an orc’s neck.

The ents took grievous wounds—flames from torches scorched their limbs, some fell under the relentless strikes of orc blades. One burning ent crashed to its knees and crushed a dozen orcs in its final act. Another lost its head to a siege axe but toppled forward, splintering half the enemy line in death.

The tide turned. The orcs, now reduced in number and hemmed in by fury on both flanks, began to retreat, but there was nowhere to go. The dwarves surged forward, hammering with renewed spirit. The elves pressed in from the side, their songs of war rising. The archmages, eyes glowing bright, hurled their last bursts of fire and ice into the panicking orc host.

And then it ended. One final cry, one final clash—and silence. The last orc stood, heaving, broken axe in hand. Fimly stepped forward, drove his blade into the beast’s chest, and it crumpled.

Breath returned to the dead forest. The sky was ash-grey and quiet.

Of the dwarves, fifty stood, armor dented, faces grim. One hundred elves remained, many with wounds but still standing tall. Of the thirty ents, only seven remained, their bark scorched and limbs cracked.

Mordil collapsed on a rock and wiped blood from his brow. “That… was the gods-damned worst fight I’ve seen.”

Gurin nodded. “But we’re alive. And they’re not.”

Fimly stood beside a dying ent who looked at him with heavy, mossed eyes. “Thank you,” the ancient said, voice like a rustling wind. “Guard the world… from what sleeps beneath.”

The ent fell still, roots curling like hands around its broken trunk.

The warriors gathered, broken but united. The road to the Tower of Guldhad was now open—but every step forward was paved in sacrifice.

Of the dwarves, fifty stood—armor dented, faces drawn and bloodied—when they made their final approach toward the Tower of Guldhad. A hundred elves marched with them, tired but with fire still in their eyes, and the great ents—tall as towers and strong as stone—numbered seven now, the last of thirty that had once marched through the forest like a wall of nature’s vengeance.

The black spire of Guldhad loomed ahead, twisted and sharp against the grey sky. The path narrowed into a long, dark canyon of rock and ash, and as the war-weary host passed through it, the trap was sprung.

From behind broken stone, burned tree stumps, and the cliffside ridges, orc warbands howled and poured forth in ambush. Horns blared from the tower walls, and the shrieking guttural voices of the orcs echoed as hundreds more stormed from the tower’s gates and hidden tunnels.

The battle was immediate and brutal.

The ents met the first wave. Their roots dug into stone and fists swung with such force that they sent orcs flying like leaves in a storm. One ent grabbed three orcs in a single handful and crushed them like insects. Another smashed his arm into a cluster, scattering limbs across the blood-wet earth.

But the orcs were prepared. Fire arrows rained down from the cliffs. Oil pots were hurled and shattered across the bark of the ancient trees, and flames followed. Three ents screamed in agony as fire licked up their trunks, collapsing into roaring pillars of smoke and ash. Another was brought down by a massive orc war machine, a spiked battering cart pulled by oxen that slammed into his knees and shattered them.

The elves, already worn, charged into the flank of the advancing orcs. Arrows flew like angry hornets, finding gaps in armor and necks, but many elves were caught in the crush. Ten were torn down in the first clash. Twenty more fell back-to-back with orcs, blades clashing in intimate death. Spears were shattered, swords bent, blood poured freely into the dust.

The dwarves held the center, forming a tight wedge to hold the breach between the cliffs. Gurin’s hammer rose and fell like thunder. Fimly fought like a beast, covered in grime and orc blood, snarling behind his beard. Mordil stood firm, swinging his axe with deliberate, brutal strength.

But even the dwarves began to buckle.

Orcs with spiked maces and cleavers pushed through. Eight dwarves were torn from the shield wall and butchered where they stood. The mages cast spells to thin the orc ranks—one mage summoned a bolt of lightning that split the ground and fried ten orcs into blackened husks—but the enemy just kept coming.

The surviving ents, now only four, charged the tower directly, uprooting barricades and smashing open the lower gates. One fell at the threshold, pierced by a dozen spears, fire eating his core. Another, driven mad with pain, hurled himself at the wall and collapsed it but burned with it.

As the last wave broke, only fifteen elves stood, breathing heavy, faces cut and bleeding. Ten dwarves remained with the party, their armor torn and weapons chipped. The mages, now only four, leaned on staves, their magic nearly spent but their resolve firm.

Inside the Tower of Guldhad, the final gauntlet began.

The great black doors opened with a screech. Inside, the hall was choked with smoke and torchlight, and rows of armored orc guards awaited.

The party charged.

The elves surged through the left corridor, blades singing, meeting brutal resistance. Five were killed outright—stabbed, beaten, or drowned under orcish axes. Mordil fought side by side with a young elven captain, both cutting down guards in a whirling flurry of blades before the elf took a spear to the ribs and collapsed.

Fimly cleaved through an orc's collarbone and shoved another off a staircase, but not before catching a jagged slash down his thigh. Gurin grappled with a towering orc brute in a narrow hallway and finally caved in his skull against the stone wall, panting with rage.

The mages pushed forward with the party, fireballs streaking down corridors, ice storms freezing guards mid-charge. One mage took an arrow through the throat while casting and dropped silently.

By the time they breached the central stairs of the tower, only eight elves stood, bloodied but proud. The dwarves had been cut to seven, including Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil. The mages numbered four.

The Tower of Guldhad trembled under their feet with the echoes of what awaited above—the Black Wizard, and whatever horrors he had yet to summon.

The great doors to the inner sanctum of the Tower of Guldhad groaned open, their blackened steel hinges moaning like the dying breath of the land itself. Within, torches of green flame lined the obsidian walls, casting flickering shadows that danced with malicious glee. The air was thick with the scent of burnt herbs, sulfur, and decay. At the far end of the vaulted chamber stood the Black Wizard, cloaked in tattered robes as dark as coal, his face hidden beneath a twisted crown of bone and iron. Behind him rose a great stone altar, veins of red light pulsing across its surface like a beating heart.

The party stepped into the chamber, Fimly leading with axe in hand, his beard stiff with dried blood. Gurin followed, shield raised, his breathing heavy. Mordil gripped his warhammer tightly, eyes locked on the wizard. The remaining five dwarven warriors took up flanking positions, scarred and weary but unbroken. Behind them came the last eight elves, their blades drawn, and finally the four archmages, robes scorched and eyes tired but burning with the last reserves of power.

The wizard turned slowly, his voice a hiss of silk on steel.

"So... the heroes arrive at the edge of the world, thinking the storm will end with my death. Fools. Do you even understand what it is that I command? Do you know what lies beneath your precious soil, beneath the roots of your great trees?"

Fimly growled, stepping forward, "Enough talk, ye dark maggot. Your blight ends here, with yer bones broken."

The wizard raised a hand, silencing the room with a single gesture.

"You speak of blight, dwarf. Yes, the blackness that withered your forests, sickened your people, and turned kin against kin. But you blame me... You do not understand what you fight. So I will grant you the gift of knowledge—before you die."

He stepped down from the altar and his cloak trailed behind him like creeping ink.

“Long ago, before your kind carved the mountains into halls, before even the elves sang their first hymns to the stars, there was another. A being known only as Theral'Azhar—the Rot Below. He slumbered in the molten marrow of the earth, his breath the source of decay, his thoughts shaping disease and ruin. When the first elves built Eldirin, they disturbed him. When the dwarves dug too deep in their hunger for gold, they awoke him.”

He extended both arms to the torchlight, revealing arms etched with runes that pulsed red.

“I found his whisper in the dark... in a forgotten tomb, buried beneath the deepest roots of the world. He offered me knowledge, and I accepted it. The ring? It is no artifact of elven nobility. It is a seed of his will, grown to corrupt and consume. Morlen’s line bore it long unknowingly, until Elrond took it, and it rooted within him. The blight you saw? That was not a spell. That was Theral'Azhar reclaiming his world.”

Mordil spat to the ground. “You’re mad. You think letting rot consume every leaf and lung is some kind of rule?”

The wizard smiled, thin and cruel.

“I think truth is ugly. The world thrives in cycles. Growth. Rot. Death. And now... rebirth through decay. I am merely the hand that guides the old cycle back to balance. But I tire of your defiance. Leave now... and die quickly.”

The archmage at the front, an elder named Varendel, raised his staff and replied with quiet fire, “We came to burn away your lie.”

The room trembled.

The Black Wizard stepped back, his robes folding around him like wings, and the green flames flared higher.

“Then come, burn... and be buried in ash.”

The chamber darkened, and the last battle began to stir in the depths of the cursed tower.

Beneath the twisted vaults of the Tower of Guldhad, the final battle began with a roar of light and shadow colliding. The Black Wizard lifted both arms and shrieked words of a forgotten tongue, the air splitting with invisible force. A wave of sickly green fire burst from his palms, not burning but rotting—armor rusted on the warriors where it stood, flesh turned pallid, eyes bled. This was *Vhir’nak Thul*, the Breath of Wither, summoning decay itself.

The dwarven archmages countered swiftly. Varendel slammed his staff into the ground, creating a dome of gold-white light, repelling the rot for a moment. “Hold the line!” he roared. One mage, young and unsteady, whispered the Light of Piercing, and from her hands shot a beam like a sun’s lance, tearing through the wizard’s shoulder and searing his robes.

The Black Wizard screamed, flesh splitting where the light touched. He twisted, fingers gnarling, and cast a spell of a thousand whispers. Shadows peeled from the walls, forming

claws, serpents, jaws—biting, slashing, tearing. One mage was ripped in half, his scream echoing only for a second before his chest exploded in black fire. Two elves were dragged into the stone, their bodies melting into screaming puddles of shadow.

The remaining elves charged. Their blades glowed with enchantments, and they leapt like lightning—swift, furious, radiant. They stabbed deep into the wizard's torso, their blades drinking his blood. But he laughed in madness, seized one elf by the throat, and uttered internal combustion. The elf burst into flames from within, falling as a smoldering husk. The others followed, pierced by dark spears the wizard summoned from his own veins.

Now only the four mages remained, weaving spells of light—*Valthar Lumen*, *Barin'Dae*, and *Thur'Ravenn*. Beams of light struck the wizard's face, chest, and legs, searing flesh, breaking ribs, tearing robes into ash. But each spell drained them. One collapsed, eyes wide and empty. Another was impaled by a shadow-lance. Varendel and the last mage combined their strength and shouted *Thal'Boreas Aruun!*, and blinded the chamber for a breathless moment and tore a hole through the wizard's gut.

The Black Wizard fell to his knees. His face now half melted, jaw unhinged, eyes black pits of hatred. "You think you win... but he stirs still... beneath you."

Then a final hiss. A last wave of rot exploded from him in all directions, killing the last two mages in a gust of shriveled screams.

Only Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil remained.

Breathing hard, their beards soaked in blood and sweat, they stood around the wizard, who struggled to rise. Fimly spat on the stone, raised his axe high. "Time to silence yer filth, shadow-breather."

He swung once—his axe cleaving into the wizard's arm, sending it spiraling.

Mordil struck next, warhammer caving in the wizard's ribcage with a thundering crunch.

The Black Wizard gasped, trying to conjure a final spell, muttering *Mal...Thro...*

But Gurin grinned. "Save yer last breath, ghoul," he muttered, and hacked the wizard's head clean off.

The head flew, bouncing twice before Gurin slammed his boot into it and sent it flying with a sickening thud against the tower wall. Bone cracked. Blood splattered.

The Black Wizard was no more.

The chamber grew still. No more whispers. No more green flame.

Just silence, broken only by the ragged breaths of the three dwarves, bloodied, panting, and staring down at the shattered body of a man who had tried to end the world.

The path home was long and somber, carved through the ruin of battle and the hush of a world beginning to mend. Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil, bloodied but alive, moved like ghosts among the highlands and the forested valleys, their boots pressing deep into damp earth softened by spring rains. The few remaining warriors had been buried in stone cairns at the foot of the Tower of Guldhad—there was no one left but the three.

On the first night, they camped by a trickling brook that ran silver in the moonlight. The trees leaned low over the water, whispering with the breeze. Fimly grunted as he dropped his pack and threw down a log to sit on.

"Don't think I've ever been this tired," he mumbled, pulling off one boot and pouring out a cup's worth of blood and mud. "If another dark wizard ever so much as sneezes near me, I'm going back to mining."

Mordil stirred the fire they'd lit with dry twigs. "Wasn't for the mages, we'd be soup on that tower floor," he said, flicking ash from his gauntlet. "We'll have to carve their names somewhere in Goldan."

The second camp was higher, where cliffs jutted like broken teeth from the land. The wind howled through the cracks in the rock, and the stars were sharp as needles in the black sky. Gurin looked out from the edge of the bluff as they ate dried boar and roots.

"This view," he said softly, "makes it harder to remember the stench of that damned tower."

On the third night, rain fell in sheets. They took shelter beneath a jut of rock covered in thick moss. Fimly snored the loudest, half-wrapped in a damp cloak, while Gurin kept watch and Mordil hummed an old dwarven dirge, low and quiet. The patter of rain against stone kept them company.

At the fifth stop, they found an old hunter's cabin, half-collapsed. They swept out the leaves and lit a fire in the hearth, sitting close for warmth. Fimly found a stash of dusty elven brandy in the rafters and cracked it open with joy.

"Well I'll be, look what fate left for us," he said, and passed the bottle around. "To those we left behind."

"To those who bought our lives with theirs," said Mordil, drinking deeply.

The forest around them grew lighter as the days passed. Blackened bark faded, green buds returning to the tips of trees. Birds began to return. On the eighth day, they passed a clearing where deer grazed in peace. It reminded them all of how far things had fallen, and how far they'd begun to rise again.

Their ninth camp was on a hillside beneath a windmill, long abandoned. Fimly whittled at a stick, Gurin smoked a pipe, and Mordil stared into the fire. No one spoke much that night.

On the final night, one day's march from Goldan, they camped in a pine grove where the trees reached high into the sky, their trunks thick and strong. The wind barely stirred, and the

air smelled of sap and soil. They laid their weapons beside them, for the first time in weeks, not clutching them in sleep.

“It’s almost over,” Mordil whispered.

Gurin nodded, lying back against a tree. “Not over,” he said. “But... changed. We’re the last of a company that will be carved in stone, lads.”

Fimly, beard tangled with pine needles, gave a quiet grunt. “We were just three bearded fools. But I reckon we done alright.”

And in that stillness, beneath the boughs of ancient pines, with the stars returning overhead, they drifted into their last sleep before home.

The gates of Goldan were thrown open wide, and the moment the party passed through, the stone halls erupted with the thunderous cheer of hundreds of voices. The dwarves lined the great stairway, hammering their axes to their shields in salute. Horns echoed through the mountain hold, deep and ancient, and the air shimmered with the golden light of torches set aflame in celebration. Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil marched in with sore feet and shining eyes, their armor dented and stained, their beards wild and glorious.

Inside the Great Hall, garlands of pine and iron chains were draped along the walls. Long tables groaned under the weight of roast boar, honeyed carrots, smoked trout, stonebread, and wheels of golden cheese. Kegs of ale and casks of dark mountain wine had been rolled out in abundance. Dwarves shouted, sang, danced, and pounded the tables with fists heavy with rings.

Queen Isandra of Eldirin sat beside King Mugumar on the raised stone dais, her silver robes catching the torchlight like moonlight on water. Her face was calm, but her eyes glimmered with warmth and gratitude.

Mugumar, standing with a goblet in one hand and his other hand resting on the hilt of his ceremonial axe, raised his voice across the hall.

“By Moradin’s beard and the roots of the world, I raise my cup to the heroes who crushed the black wizard of Guldhad and his cursed army. Three brave souls—Fimly, Gurin, Mordil—who would rather die swinging an axe than see evil walk our lands.”

A roar of approval shook the hall. Fimly stood, swaying a little, then raised a mug nearly half his size.

“Cheers...mfffph...to all...and to the dead who bought us this ale with their blood!”

Gurin yelled over him, laughing, “And may no more Elronds rise from your elven courts!” He nodded toward Queen Isandra, who chuckled softly and raised her cup.

Isandra stood then, her voice gentle but clear, and the room hushed.

“Let there be no more Elronds, indeed. But let there be peace. Let us remember Morlen, and even Elrond, in their better days. Let us remember the fallen elves and dwarves, who died side by side beneath the shadow of the tower. Tonight, we drink not only for victory—but for healing.”

She and Mugumar clinked their goblets together with a rich chime, and the crowd erupted in cheers once more.

Throughout the mountain hold, music broke out—lutes and flutes, deep dwarven drums and elven harps strung with silver thread. Dwarves stomped to dance, tankards sloshing, and elven minstrels joined the song with graceful steps and high, melodic laughter.

The party found themselves surrounded by plates and pitchers. Fimly had sauce down his beard and an entire ham bone in each hand. Gurin shouted drinking songs loud enough to rattle goblets. Mordil toasted every face within reach, whether elf or dwarf.

In Eldirin, too, lights shone in the trees. Lanterns hung from every branch, and the river glowed with floating candles set adrift by children. Taverns rang with songs and flutes, and elves danced with dwarves under the open sky.

That night, the kingdoms of stone and leaf shared a breath of peace, the kind that comes only after long sorrow. In the echoing heart of Goldan, with laughter and light, they drank to the past—and to whatever future might still be written.

The sun had barely begun to stretch its golden fingers over the misty rooftops of Goldan when the party stumbled out of the grand feast hall and into the familiar embrace of the Ember Beard tavern. The heavy oak doors creaked open for them like an old friend, and the smell of roast boar, pipe smoke, and a hundred spilled ales welcomed them home.

Fimly, Gurin, and Mordil fell into their usual corner booth like collapsing sacks of potatoes. A roar of laughter from the backroom, the clink of mugs, the rustle of hearth flames—it all wrapped around them like a warm cloak.

Soon, the two elven women they had once guided through Goldan joined them again, gliding in like whispers of forest air among the dwarven din. Their eyes sparkled with merriment, cheeks already pink from wine. One leaned on Mordil's shoulder, the other tugged at Fimly's beard with a grin.

Gurin, staring into his half-empty tankard, said, “I’ve had enough of swinging blades and cleaving skulls. I think I’ll head back down below—join the mine crews. Dig deep, take it slow. Maybe I’ll strike a vein and finally get me a little pile of gold to sit on.”

Mordil leaned back, a frothy mustache coating his upper lip. “Aye... I think I’m done with wars too. I want to build a place, something warm, where stories are louder than sword clangs. I’m settin’ up a tavern by the river. I’ll call it... Plump Trout.”

The elven woman beside him chuckled. “Plump Trout?”

He shrugged. “Why not? Fat fish, cold ale, soft beds. What else does a soul need?”

Then they all turned to Fimly, who had been staring into his mug with unusual intensity. He lifted his face slowly, cheeks red, beard tangled with crumbs and foam.

“Mffmff...mphfff....mffff,” he muttered.

Everyone blinked.

“What was that?” asked Gurin.

“Might’ve been a declaration of peace, or maybe a threat to wrestle a bear,” said Mordil with a laugh.

The elf woman beside Fimly just leaned her head on his shoulder, smiling. “I think he said he’s done too. Whatever it was, it’s good enough.”

They laughed until their stomachs hurt and drank until the first shafts of dawn slipped through the tavern windows.

The next day, the paths of old brothers parted with quiet handshakes and nods that said more than words. Gurin reported to the mines, his pickaxe slung over one shoulder, whistling a tune as he descended into the depths. Mordil stood at the riverside, looking out over the calm waters, imagining a wooden sign swinging in the breeze with “Plump Trout” carved into it. And Fimly was nowhere to be found.

It wasn’t until late afternoon that someone spotted him—barefoot, beaming, a daisy tucked behind his ear, wandering the hill paths with the elf woman by his side, mumbling what might’ve been a love song or maybe a new ale recipe.

And so the age of battle faded behind them, not with war drums but with laughter, dreams, and the clink of mugs raised to peace.